

Haringey's Token Consultation

On Tuesday 16 December 2014, a Haringey Council Cabinet meeting agreed on 'the next stage of consultation' on its 'Medium Term Financial Strategy, Corporate Plan and associated documents'. (Haringey Council 2014a) This consultation period opened the following day (Wednesday, 17 December) and was due to close four weeks later on Sunday, 18 January 2015.

Three things are worth noting about this consultation process. Firstly, the Cabinet meeting refers to an earlier consultation exercise, between September and November 2014. Secondly, neither the Haringey Learning Disabilities Partnership Board nor the Haringey Autism Working Group were involved in any of these consultations. Thirdly, there are a number of unsatisfactory features of the proposed process of consultation. Let's take these in turn.

The Earlier Consultation: September-November 2014

According to the minutes of the 16 December Cabinet meeting, consultations on the Corporate Plan and the Medium Term Financial Strategy were conducted through Haringey Association for Voluntary and Community Organisations (HAVCO), Together North London and Healthwatch Haringey. (Haringey Council 2014a) These involved 1,118 people who participated in an on-line survey, attending a borough wide roadshow, and seven area meetings. There were 'outreach' events 'to engage younger people, older people, Turkish women and members of Chinese, Polish, Latin American and Muslim communities'. The council also organised a 'business breakfast', 12 focus groups and other 'listening exercises'.

This consultation exercise made no attempt to consult people with autism and learning disabilities and their families and carers – despite the fact that services for this population are the major target of proposed cuts. The only reference to people with learning disabilities in the 49-page summary report comes in a parenthesis to the question: 'Is Haringey somewhere that adults who need more support have choices about their lives (for example, those with physical or learning disabilities)?' (HAVCO 2014) Though 63 per cent of respondents answered 'No' to this question, there is no further consideration of how these choices might be extended. The list of more than 20 'themes' and 'issues raised' in the course of these consultations includes no specific reference to services for adults with autism and learning disabilities.

The Earlier Non-Consultation: November 2013-November 2014

The long-standing Haringey Learning Disabilities Partnership Board brings together representatives of the council, professionals and people with learning disabilities and their families and carers. It meets monthly to discuss matters of concern and to raise awareness of issues of learning disability in the borough and to improve services to this community. The Haringey Autism Working Group was formed in early 2014 following meetings between families and carers and representatives of the Council and Haringey Clinical Commissioning Group, because of concerns about threatened cuts to care packages. This group met approximately monthly during 2014, advancing plans to constitute a Haringey Autism

Partnership Board. A meeting scheduled for 11 November was cancelled at short notice by the council: no reason was given and no plans were suggested for an alternative date.

In retrospect, it is striking that in the course of 2014, while council officials were preparing plans for what is now described as a ‘transformation’ or ‘re-design’ of services, there was no attempt to consult either of these representative bodies about these plans. Indeed, in the course of various discussions about processes of assessment, funding and provision of services, there was never any mention of the concept of ‘reablement’ which has suddenly emerged as the major principle guiding the reorganisation and rationalisation of services. Nor was there any mention at any of these meetings of plans to close residential or day facilities or to impose mass redundancies on staff. There has been little sign of the spirit of ‘partnership’ that the Council claims to uphold.

At the 5 November 2013 meeting attended by Council leader Claire Kober and senior representatives of the CCG, it was accepted that ‘there will be no change to individual budgets and care packages without full assessment of need, in consultation with service users and families’. On 13 November 2013, Jill Shattock for the CCG wrote to Dr Hilarie Williams of the Haringey Autism Group insisting that there was ‘no intention of reducing levels of care and support required for any of our patients’. These principles are now jeopardised by planned cuts and closures.

‘This is called a public consultation’

The consultation process announced, without prior notice, on 16 December is scheduled to last for ‘a month’. Allowing for the Christmas and New Year holidays, this amounts to 19 working days. In addition to completing an on-line questionnaire, residents are invited to attend any of four one-hour meetings at three different centres in the borough. Given that the Council is currently providing services for 648 individuals with autism, severe learning disabilities, and other complex needs, these arrangements afford little time – or space – in which these individuals and their families and other carers can be consulted.

According to the minutes of the 16 December meeting, ‘a consultation pack and questionnaire will be available on-line and in libraries’. But there are a number of curious features of the information available on the Haringey Council website.

Under the headline *Building a Stronger Haringey Together: Three year plan and budget consultation for residents and businesses*, the website offers a number of links to further documents. The first of these is *Building a Stronger Haringey Together: Draft Corporate Plan 2015-2018*, a 76-page document. (2014b) There is no link to the edited, 28-page, version with the same title as the headline above, which is clearly designed for the purposes of consultation and has been circulated to individuals invited to consultation events. (Haringey Council 2014c)

The Draft Corporate Plan is more significant for its omissions than its content. Following the pious declaration that the council aims to ‘empower all adults to live healthy, long and fulfilling lives’ (p22), it asserts that ‘residents assessed as needing formal care and/or health

support will receive responsive, safe and high quality services'. (p24) There is no reference to people with learning disabilities, autism, or complex needs. Nor is there any reference to plans to close day centres, cut care packages, reduce social work staff, or cut funding to voluntary organisations.

As it happens, the 28-page version of the Corporate Plan, though it is not available on the council website, does provide more detail on plans for the relevant services. It indicates plans to close Linden (residential) home; to reduce grants to the voluntary sector by £1.4m; to 'review appropriateness of care packages' in favour of a 'reablement approach' (though no figures of proposed cuts are provided).

However, the omissions are also striking. There is no reference to plans to close three out of four day centres for people with autism/LD/complex needs (including Roundway, the only dedicated autism service); no reference to plans to reduce social work staff by 25%; no indication that the planned reduction in the care package budget is £9.7m.

These more detailed proposals, together with figures on proposed spending cuts, can be found – with some difficulty – on the Council website. A link under the *Building a Stronger Haringey Together* headline leads to a 'the full cabinet report and Medium Term Financial Strategy', which in turn provides a series of links to 'supporting documents'. Deeply buried here can be found a link to '*P2 savings 031214(final) item 778*' – which provides the crucial details omitted in the major consultation documents. (Haringey Council 2014d)

While discovering the true extent of the council's austerity plans is a daunting challenge even for somebody with advanced cognitive and IT skills, those with recognised learning disabilities – who will be most affected by these cuts - are presented with the least information of all. The 'easy read' letter issued in the name of Councillor Peter Morton, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, blandly states that 'we are asking people who live in Haringey to tell us what they think of our plans' – without indicating what these plans are, and, in particular, not informing residents of the scale of cuts and closures that are proposed. (Morton, P. 2014) Those invited to attend are to be issued copies of the 28-page consultation document – though, as we have seen, this also omits crucial information about cuts. 'This is called a public consultation' writes Cllr Morton.

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31 December 2014

References

Haringey Council (2014a) *Final Corporate Planning Cabinet Report*, authorised by Nick Walkley, Chief Executive, presented to Cabinet meeting ,16 December.

Haringey Council (2014b) *Building a Stronger Haringey Together: Draft Corporate Plan 2015-2018*.

Haringey Council (2014c) *Building a Stronger Haringey Together: Three year plan and budget consultation for residents and businesses.*

Haringey Council (2014d) *Priority 2 (P2) Savings 631214 (final)item 778.*

HAVCO (2014) *Investing in our tomorrow: summary report*, 8 December.

Morton, Peter (2014) *Consultation Letter (easy read)*, 17 December.