

Sent: 05 June 2019 14:26

Subject: Council contract termination that will have severe consequences for blind and partially sighted people living in Swansea

Dear Councillor,

I am writing to inform you of a contract termination by Swansea Council that will have devastating consequences for people who have and will develop significant sight loss, which will also quickly lead to increased demand on already stretched council resources.

We have been contracted by Swansea Council to deliver essential services to blind and partially sighted people since 2014 but received 3 months' termination notice via a short letter sent on 15 May. This came as a complete surprise for a number of reasons, which include:

- > We had a contract extension until the end of September.
- > A review of sensory services (internal and commissioned) has been due for around a year and a half and we were assured this would be completed before decisions on contracts were made.
- > This review has not taken place and we have outlined a new working model to the commissioning officer and sensory services team leader that should reduce the council's overall cost and at least maintain and probably increase outcomes for blind and partially sighted people. The commissioning officer said she would make sure we were involved in the review and seemed to understand the value of what we were proposing.
- > There have been no issues with our contract delivery as far as we are aware and no rationale has been provided in the notice letter despite a request for that.
- > We are not aware that an equality impact assessment has been undertaken as part of this decision, which I hope is not the case given the significant impact it will have and that it is a requirement of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

We highlighted these points to the Principal Officer for Prevention, Wellbeing and Commissioning when we first received verbal notice of the termination and asked for him to provide the rationale and equality impact assessment if they decided to continue with it. We have not received that as part of the written notice, which is merely a paragraph long.

It is really disappointing, particularly given the financial cost is so low, that the contract has been terminated early and before a review of sensory services has taken place. The way it has been terminated; with no reasons given, no thanks for the work we have been doing on behalf of the council for the last six years and no information about if or how they would like to work with us in future; is also very disappointing.

The people we support, over 800 each year, are a group defined as at risk in the Welsh Government's Social Services and Well-being Act. This Act, as you know, creates both a strategic and a practical duty in relation to preventative services. At the practical level, local authorities are required to provide or arrange for the provision of services that will contribute towards preventing/delaying/reducing the development of needs for care and support; minimising the effect on disabled people of their disabilities; helping to prevent people from suffering abuse or neglect and enabling people to live their lives as independently as possible.

We know our services prevent or reduce people's need for statutory services. We also provide crucial early intervention work when people first develop a significant sight condition, which again lowers the demand on local authority services. In our last outcome monitoring survey, 25% of people said they needed less support from their local authority and 14% of people said they needed less support from their health board since getting help from us. There is already a waiting list for council rehabilitation services and this will undoubtedly grow with the Council's decision to terminate our contract. The support people will require when finally seen will also be more complex and resource heavy in our absence.

We appreciate the difficult decisions authorities need to make in the current financial climate but we believe this will end up costing the authority more and things should have been done differently with regard to this process, which has potentially been unlawful.

The change we are seeking is for the contract notice to be put on hold until the review of sensory services has taken place. I am confident, as we have been doing with other authorities with great success, that we can suggest a different and better way for the authority and the third sector to deliver essential services for people who can be very vulnerable. I have already had productive discussions with Sense Cymru (who support people with dual sensory loss and complex disabilities) and they are keen to explore a better, more collaborative model with the Council. Like us, before our contract notice, they have been on six month extension contracts for quite a while, which is very difficult to resource as it provides little job security.

Our ask to you please, is that you raise the question of whether proper process has taken place on this and whether a different approach should be taken to balance the council's needs to reduce budget whilst providing key services to people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act and Social Services and Wellbeing Act.

For information, the contract is with RNIB but subcontracted to Cardiff Institute for the Blind as the Principal Officer at the time the contract started was understandably not keen to use our Cardiff Institute for the Blind name in Swansea. As we have an association agreement with RNIB and work very closely with them, it was agreed the contract would be under the RNIB name but delivered by my staff. The likelihood is that we will need to make at least one redundancy as part of this decision

and reduce the number of volunteers we have. Many of these volunteers have sight loss themselves and find the confidence and feeling of self-worth they get from volunteering life changing.

Also for information, a formal complaint was made by Vision Impaired West Glamorgan (a voluntary body that acts as a voice for blind and partially sighted people) to the Council in January of this year related to the timing and accessibility of the Council's consultation on Social Services Commissioning Strategies. The response from the Council on that was: "If and when the Strategies are agreed, full service reviews will be undertaken which may lead to proposals for specific change. We would of course fully consult on any such proposals in a specific consultation, allowing adequate time for all interested parties to respond".

Again, we do not believe a review has been carried out and there has been no consultation with interested parties such as us or blind and partially sighted people.