

SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 26/2016
PUBLICATION DATE: 29/03/2016

Evaluation of Front Line Advice Services Grant (FLASG)

Executive Summary

1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 Old Bell 3 was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct a process and outcome review of the Front Line Advice Services Grant (FLASG). The evaluation was expected to review the extent to which FLASG was meeting its stated purposes and identify the effects of the intervention upon beneficiaries.
- 1.2 The evaluation was based upon a work programme undertaken between October 2015 and January 2016 which involved an inception and scoping phase, developing a logic model, undertaking a literature review of key documents, preparing a light-touch policy review and developing semi structured discussion guides. It also involved a package of fieldwork with staff based at FLASG funded organisations, interviewing Welsh Government officials and other key stakeholders and conducting interviews with 40 FLASG beneficiaries.

2. The FLASG scheme

- 2.1 FLASG was introduced in 2014 by the former Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty, Jeff Cuthbert AM, as a new three-year funding scheme by the Welsh Government to support free, independent front-line advice services across Wales. Following an open bidding process, it was announced in October 2014 that four services would be funded (backdated to April 2014) namely:
 - Citizens Advice Cymru and Shelter Cymru to deliver specialist advice on welfare benefits, housing and debt.
 - Citizens Advice Cymru and SNAP Cymru to deliver specialist discrimination advice across the full range of protected characteristics.
 - Age Cymru to deliver information and advice services for older people and their carers.
 - Tenovus Cancer Care to deliver information and advice services to cancer patients and their families.
- 2.2 FLASG represents one of several sources of funding that supports the advisory

sector in Wales. In all, annual funding of £2 million is being made available by the Welsh Government and the scheme supports the work of over 40 full-time equivalent advisory posts.

- 2.3 Over its initial 18-month period of delivery between April 2014 and September 2015, FLASG supported nearly 38,000 clients and contributed towards handling a further 6,000 clients and 15,000 enquiries. During this period, FLASG also contributed to an overall income gain of £7.81 million for beneficiaries across two of the grant funding agreements and supported clients to write off a total of £1.94 million of debt.

3. Key findings

- 3.1 The evaluation found that there was a clear rationale for the Welsh Government to make available funding to support the delivery of front-line advisory services in Wales. The introduction of FLASG was in keeping with the Welsh Government's policy commitment at the time to support front line advisory services in order to help alleviate the impacts of various funding cutbacks, notably via the UK Government's welfare reform and cuts in legal aid services. The evaluation also found that FLASG represented an effort to address the broad agenda set out within the Review of Advice Services in Wales to increase collaboration, partnership and networking between advice providers and to adopt a more common approach to quality standards within the sector.
- 3.2 The evaluation found that FLASG was appropriately designed with the objective of encouraging a much more strategic and co-ordinated approach to the delivery of advice services in Wales. The provisions funded have in our view been in keeping with this objective, particularly the efforts deployed to establish new pan-Wales national helpline services. In adopting this approach, however, there has been a danger that some specialist and localised provision may have been lost, and it may be worth considering this issue in any future funding rounds.
- 3.3 We conclude that FLASG funding has been made available to the sector in a flexible manner and this has been a real strength of the approach taken by the Welsh Government. It is proving to be a critical source of funding for funded organisations, particularly in terms of helping the sector maintain its specialist advisory capacity and also in the way that it part-funds a much larger advisory service across Wales.
- 3.4 We found evidence to show that the demand for advice provision which FLASG helps to meet has outstripped the supply available. As a result, we take the view that the services funded via FLASG have not duplicated any other services available - largely due to the significant demand which the sector is struggling to meet.
- 3.5 The time taken to establish aspects of new services during the first year in 2014/15, particularly national telephone support services, - which was in part the result of the relatively late decision by the Welsh Government to award funding part-way through the year - meant that FLASG did not operate as efficiently as possible during this first year. However, by 2015/16 all funded providers were operating to full capacity and the outputs being reported for the first six months of 2015/16 are, proportionately, significantly higher than those achieved during the first year.
- 3.6 We conclude that the FLASG scheme has been managed well and appropriate structures have been put in place by grant funded organisations to oversee and deliver services. We also conclude that appropriate client managements systems have been deployed to evidence client outputs and outcomes, albeit that the lack of

uniformity in terms of reporting the number of clients advised is problematic. We found no evidence to suggest that outcomes were being over-estimated - on the contrary, in some cases, it was clear that the figures being reported to Welsh Government were likely to understate actual gains.

- 3.7 In terms of funding and achievements, the evaluation found that the cost of supporting each client averaged £93 during 2014/15 and £56 to date during 2015/16. We conclude that FLASG has offered a very good return on investment to date and, taking the second year's outputs to date as the most realistic data on ongoing performance, suggests that the return on investment can be expected to be in the ratio of every £1 invested to £5.30 return for the remaining period of the scheme.
- 3.8 Funded organisations have performed well against their respective targets albeit that the late start during 2014/15 accounted for some areas of under-performance. The performance of funded organisations was much better over the course of the second year of delivery and it is expected that targets will be far exceeded during the second year by March 2016.
- 3.9 Our evaluation found that grant funded organisations adopt different methods of allocating client outputs to the FLASG scheme. As a result, any reporting of overall client numbers supported must either distinguish between those directly supported or be caveated with a statement such as 'FLASG having contributed towards'. It was also the case that client enquiries and client cases were combined in some cases whereas other organisations reported them separately. One of the strengths of the scheme is the use of concrete evidence by funded organisations to report the outcomes achieved by clients supported by FLASG.
- 3.10 Feedback from beneficiaries suggests that the services provided have often been intensive and hands-on in nature rather than merely providing advice and information provision. The feedback also suggests that the provision made available has been of very good quality.
- 3.11 While FLASG has achieved a great deal in terms of its work with beneficiaries, we conclude that the scheme has only had a marginal impact in terms of improving levels of integration and collaboration across the support network, despite this being a goal of the scheme. We further conclude that FLASG has contributed positively towards improving the quality of advisory provision, not least because it required as a condition of grant funded organisations to adopt quality standards, particularly in the light of feedback from users of the services which point to very high satisfaction levels generally.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 The following recommendations are suggested for the current FLASG funding period:
 - That KPIs relating to client outcomes (income gains and debts written off) be revised upwards for the remaining delivery period.
 - That consideration be given to the adoption of a new KPI which captures and reports upon client income levels sustained.
 - That a common definition be adopted across the FLASG scheme for 'client cases' and 'client enquiries' and that funded organisations distinguish

between these in their reporting to the Welsh Government.

- That funded organisations only report upon those clients who have been directly supported via the FLASG scheme (and not all clients supported regardless of the funding source) to enable the Welsh Government to capture those outputs which can be directly attributed to the FLASG funding.
- That funded organisations also report upon those outcomes where advisors believe their advice should have led to income gains and debts written off but where this has not been confirmed as already having happened by the beneficiary as a separate KPI to the Welsh Government.
- That those funded organisations who support very large number of clients reduce the sample sizes which are used to report outputs such as satisfaction levels and that greater emphasis be placed on qualitative rather than quantitative reporting of client experiences.
- That the Welsh Government, in partnership with funded organisations, explore how the collective outcomes and achievements of FLASG funded provision can be better promoted and disseminated.

4.2 The following recommendations are made for the longer-term:

- That funding for front line advisory services in Wales be safeguarded for the foreseeable future given the significant need and demand placed upon existing services
- That any future funding scheme takes into consideration the current mapping exercise being overseen by the IAPF and the Information and Advice Strategy for Wales currently being developed.
- That any future funding application process be extended in length to enable potential providers to explore and develop meaningful collaborative proposals, particularly with localised or specialist providers.
- That funding be awarded ideally prior to the start of the financial year (rather than at the mid-way stage) to allow for funded providers to maximise upon what can be achieved during the first year of delivery.
- That it be a condition of funding that any provisions funded are totally integrated i.e. that localised and national/remote provisions are integrated so that clients can be referred directly from one to another (this has not been the case across all existing FLASG funded provision).
- That the Welsh Government explores the possibility of streamlining future funding streams, particularly FLASG and other grant schemes.

Report authored by Nia Bryer, Old Bell 3 Ltd

Reviewed by Gareth Williams, Old Bell 3 Ltd



Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Dr Semele Mylona

Social Research and Information Division

Knowledge and Analytical Services

Welsh Government, Cathays Park

Cardiff, CF10 3NQ

Email: Semele.Mylona@wales.gsi.gov.uk

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