

24th RAN Advice Forum Report

‘Key Government policies affecting you and your service users’

July 11, 2025

Introduction

1 The RAN Chair, Richard Harrison, began by welcoming everyone to the Forum. He explained that No 5 had recently achieved the RAN Quality Standard, but that no-one from No 5 was available to come and be presented with their Certificate. However, those attending the Forum gave No 5 a round of applause for their achievement.

Presentation

2 He then welcomed the Forum speaker, Yuan Yang MP, reminding those present that this was a much appreciated return visit, since Yuan had been one of the speakers at our November 2024 Forum. For those who had not been able to attend that Forum, he explained that Yuan was the first Chinese-born Briton ever to be elected to the UK Parliament. She had come to the UK when she was four and moved to Reading in 2009. She had studied at Oxford and the LSE and worked as a journalist in China for the FT. Since being elected a year ago she had been appointed to the Treasury Select Committee and become chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Social Science and Policy.

3 Yuan began her presentation by reflecting on her first year as an MP, and thanking RAN member organisations for their support for her constituents and with her community consultations. In her view local healthcare, particularly GP services, and education were particularly important for many of our service users, and she drew attention to the Government’s recent expansion of free school meals as a key lever in tackling child poverty. In addition she had recently learnt that both Reading and Wokingham were going to be locations for the new ‘Best Start’ Family Hubs, where families with children would be able to access a range of services and get integrated support. The Devolution Bill, now going through Parliament, would create stronger local and regional bodies, and would make provision for community asset ownership, which could help local voluntary organisations secure buildings for community use. She concluded by asking our members to put her in touch with service users who had experience of dealing with Government services - real voices were particularly powerful in enabling MPs like her to convey the impact of policies to Government Ministers.

Questions

4 There followed a short period of questions covering a range of topics:

- her participation in the recent challenge to the Government on welfare reform;
- education, health and care (EHC) plans for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and the way in which the cost of these to Councils was being masked by a process of ‘statutory override’;
- concern about possible delay in work to reduce violence against women and girls; and
- the impact of social media.

5 Yuan explained that:

- On welfare reform she was seeking to be a 'critical friend' to the Government, to try and improve policy. The recently-announced review by Stephen Timms would be conducted jointly with the key disability organisations
- She felt that the EHC plan system had become adversarial, and that the use of the 'Statutory override' to move its cost to Councils off their balance sheets would become unsustainable. She recognised that trust in SEND policy and provision was low, but its funding had now been set and would increase above the level of inflation
- She did not think that action to reduce violence against women and girls was being delayed - she knew that Jess Phillips, the Minister responsible, was deeply committed to the policy
- A very substantial number of MPs were concerned about the damaging impact of social media.

Discussion Groups

- 6 The discussion groups were asked to consider two questions:
- Which Government policies are likely to help you and your service users?
 - Which policies are likely to cause difficulties for you and your service users?

A Helpful policies

- 7 The discussion groups welcomed the following policies:
- The 'Best Start Family Hubs - which were seen as potentially an excellent environment in which to engage the wider family, and also a 'safe space' which could encourage vulnerable people, particularly women, to come forward. In engaging with them, voluntary organisations should use their learning from 'Sure Start', and it would be great if they were able to access the Hubs without charge, to provide information and deliver support.
 - Free Breakfast Clubs for every child
 - The recent changes to the Welfare Reform Bill - particularly the reduced numbers of PIP work capability assessments and the removal of these assessments on transition from ESA to Universal Credit. However, the PIP work assessment process was still weak - it was ridiculous that so many PIP assessments get overturned on appeal. Assessors needed better quality training. Moreover, the original provisions had led to a great deal of work by member organisations dealing with service users who were panicking about losing their benefits, which had absorbed significant resources unnecessarily, as it turned out. There also remained concerns about the possibility of a 'two tier' system being created.
 - Several funding provisions - free school meals and holiday funds, the restoration of Winter Fuel payments, the Household Support Fund, and Safe Accommodation funding
 - The changes being made to SEND and EHC plans, particularly those that aimed to involve parents more closely in the process, and would enable intervention for young people pre-EHCP who needed SEND support
 - The Renters Reform Bill, particularly the removal of S21 evictions and the reform of renting conditions such as local licensing and 'advertised rent only'. However the Bill was not adequately controlling rent increases.
 - The regulation of social media - felt particularly keenly here in Reading because of the Ollie Stephens case.

- Tackling violence against women and girls - though it was essential to start with young people and schools, and create good role models
- Increases in neighbourhood policing - though there was a need to ensure police training was consistently good quality
- The provision for community asset ownership - though it was not yet clear how this would work
- The reductions in NHS and CAMHS waiting lists (when the latter happened)

B Policies likely to cause difficulties

- 8 The groups saw problems with the following policies:
- Immigration and refugees
 - Increases in employers' national insurance payments - which were particularly difficult for the voluntary sector to absorb
 - Changes in, and the complexity of, the benefit system, which could be confusing to older or isolated people
 - The speed of increases in the minimum and living wage
 - Changes to inheritance tax, and making a pension part of a person's estate
 - The abolition of Healthwatch

C Other issues

- 9 A number of other issues, mainly about gaps in policy or provision, were raised during the discussions:
- The Government's failure to promote the benefits of the voluntary sector
 - The lack of funding for the voluntary sector - with no inflation-related increases in contract values over the life of a contract
 - The lack of action on food poverty or holiday hunger
 - Local Housing Allowance was not keeping pace with rents, which was leading to rough sleeping and kids living in sub-standard accommodation
 - The lack of legal aid for vulnerable people
 - The lack of provision for adult mental health
 - The absence of sufficient good quality training for those working with people affected by domestic abuse or violence against parents
 - Access to Government services for the visually impaired - for example, PIP forms are not available in large print, and some Government Departments require callers to use a keypad to get through to them

Conclusion

10 In response, Yuan recognised the concerns expressed, and said that she felt many DWP staff also recognised the problems, but were under a great deal of pressure. She concluded by highlighting two recent policy innovations - the work that Wes Streeter was doing on healthy food with supermarkets, and the work with pensioners' children and grandchildren - who had much less concern about stigma - to get the parents or grandparents to take up pension credits.

11 Richard Harrison brought the Forum to a close by thanking Yuan for her presence and excellent contributions, and invited those attending to stay and network.