

Voluntary action and public services

Whilst Annie Kelly's excellent article in the Guardian (19.3.08) captures my rage about what is happening to the VCS, it doesn't quite capture the perspective in one important respect – voluntary agencies delivering public services. Locally-based voluntary agencies have been delivering services to people for ever and these organisations form the backbone of the sector. It would be daft to say that they shouldn't do this. Some of these services – advice and advocacy work being a classic example – have to be independent of the State to do their job properly. The problem with this part of the discussion is that various things have been conflated.

On the one hand, there is the question of privatisation of public services. This is the main ideological drive behind the public service delivery plan and, in this, the Government does not care whether services go to a re-styled voluntary sector or to the private sector – indeed the expression 'private and voluntary sectors' is now standard protocol for Government ministers' pronouncements on this issue. The essence of this programme is that the Government decides what, when, who and how.

On the other hand, is the fact that there are thousands of voluntary agencies delivering services with public money – sometimes as grants, sometimes with contracts or SLAs. The essence of this approach is that these organisations, working alone or together, have decided what they want to do, with which people or communities, and have gone off to find the money they need for this. Moving the budgets that support this work into commissioning totally redefines the relationship to one of a subservient contractor.

According to the likes of Phil Hope and Stephen Bubb, no doubt the complexities and dangers of these changes will be neutralised by 'partnerships' – we're all working together as one big happy family for a common purpose. Local partnerships – especially focussed currently on the LSP and LAA – will hammer out difficulties, do all the needs assessment, canvas views and produce a consensus. Bingo! The circle is squared – the services that will be commissioned will be the ones that the community is demanding and run by the agencies that all agree are best 'fit for purpose'. This is, of course, complete rubbish.

Partnerships are dominated by statutory sector agencies, often serviced by officers not competent enough to deal with the complexities of their situation, and who spend more time looking upwards for Government instructions than downwards to the communities they are supposed to be serving. Where this is not the case – and there are many in the statutory sector with good hearts and sound perspectives – the constraints of their

structural position in the system effectively renders them ineffective. The beast of dictat, targets and performance management has to be fed.

These are personal views; the Coalition corporately does not have a view; the Coalition does not exist corporately. There will be many different views held by those involved in the Coalition about scale, nuance, direction, the role of the State, the role of the sector. But the role of the Coalition is to provide a focus for organising amongst the many thousands of people in the sector who do not like what is happening and are prepared to do something to get a better result. What this means at local level will be contingent on the circumstances of time and place.....

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