

Commissioning - How to kill the goose that lays the golden egg

The National Coalition for Independent Action is a new initiative to promote and defend the independence of the Voluntary and Community Sector. Elizabeth Bayliss, Executive Director of Social Action for Health (SAfH), here addresses a crucial Coalition concern - how the new fashion for 'procurement and commissioning' is threatening both the independence and the effectiveness of voluntary agency work.

The Voluntary sector and the State

The relationship between the statutory sector and the voluntary sector (VCS) is a fluid matter, tied up with the dynamics of macro politics. The VCS runs alongside the State, following the funding and shape-shifting to make the most of the current tide – inevitable, as the sector sits inside the same political context as the rest of civil society. The sector's survival depends upon this alignment, because of the significance of statutory funding. But it brings threats to independence.

So what about independence?

Can the sector be independent when it is State funded? Does it matter?

The answers lie in the role and variety of the VCS as an alternative provider and commentator. The sector forms a bridge between the public sector and local communities; an alternative to the private sector; an external reference point between national and local State; it embraces large national charities and tiny local groups. The VCS offers a whole other world of involvement with, and action for, the health of our people and our society. These are political functions and explain why campaigning (and opposition) is both an inherent feature, and an essential aspect of our democracy. Independence is integral to this perspective.

How is 'commissioning' changing things?

Of itself, commissioning is simply a matter of buying something that someone has to sell. The State wants to buy and the VCS the wherewithal to sell. On the surface, a simple transaction. But what exactly is being bought and sold?

Since the advent of the purchaser-provider split in the 1980's, quantitative measures have increasingly become the order of the day. So many units of activity for so much money: jobs created, housing units built, people trained, contacts made, visits undertaken. This creates an emptiness at the heart of what should be a political and social intent. By reducing outcomes to a set of numbers, funders divest their commissioning work of real meaning and emasculate the work. Despite huge investment, the impact seems slight because the meaning of the work and the lessons from it cannot be drawn out.

No dialogue

In place of an iterative political process to assess the true impact of public investment, there is a rush to open up a market, embrace the private sector and its values, and create “a level playing field” between the sectors. The market has imposed the lowest common denominator - counting numbers. Meeting targets and accounting for the funding has become the sole purpose. Funders are simply not interested in listening to anything we might have learnt whilst doing the work. We cannot enter into the dialogue we want when there is no one to talk to. We never get to the narrative, from which can be drawn the political implications. None of us can ever move on.

This is well illustrated by our own involvement with the NDC (New Deal for Communities), where, for over 5 years, we worked with local people on issues of health and well-being. Consistently we tried to engage in dialogue. Consistently we asked the NDC for a forum where all providers could meet and learn. Not once were we able to have such a conversation. The project ended, around £600,000 was spent; it all just finished. In the process, we were treated by the commissioners with little respect, indeed with suspicion, about our integrity and probity. To flush away the meaning of our work with communities demonstrated a cynicism that is poisonous to the political process itself.

Commissioning detached

Commissioning has been detached from its content - the provision of public services. Commissioners commonly have no understanding of the work they have been told to commission; no understanding of the profile of local provision; are driven by the top-down agendas of their bosses, themselves only interested in looking up to Government instructions. Commissioning has become detached from the realities of local need, the real-time slog of providing services and the implications for local agencies and the local economy. This leads to serious de-stabilisation.

If commissioners genuinely worked alongside the VCS on their proposals, they would stop wasting time and causing distress. They would discover how precious small agencies are to local people, how people depend upon them. They would find out how advocacy, respect, support, and care all tie together. They would begin to understand how these agencies serve to build and sustain hope, to create local work and add blocks on which to build a fair and just society.

Living with uncertainty, losing respect

In the VCS, we live with uncertainty. It is a fact of life. If people can not cope with that, they should not join us. In SAfH, we secure funding from the local health and social care economy, national State and charitable funders. We survive year on year. We do well, on the whole. However, it is never quite enough and each year we run a deficit – not large, but sufficient to mean that

our management support is threadbare – a practical reality we share with many other VCS organisations.

Commissioners, on the other hand, cannot live with uncertainty. They cannot begin by offering us the respect that we know what we are doing – rather they tell us what to do and how to do it. They want outcomes, but they want outcomes delivered their way. Many commissioners do not understand that the process - the means by which these outcomes are achieved - is the very skill-set of the agencies they are commissioning. The commissioning approach is driven by suspicion and obsessed with control. The loss is ours – the flexibility to work bottom-up and the necessary uncertainty of not knowing the results of our work before we start.

Turning the tables

The pursuit of Government agendas is being played out by middle managers, at local level, working to a poor brief. This both undermines the value of Government investment and starves the Government of the narrative impact of their decisions. It is self destructive. It is time that top-down, command-and-control gives way to a transactional model, framed by a requirement that local needs require local solutions, and sustained by stories not slogans. We call for strategic investment based on true consultation and mature awareness of how to engage local people meaningfully. We call on commissioners to get over their discomfort with not being in control; to come out into local communities and listen to what people have to say; to learn how to negotiate; to see value in dialogue and disagreement; to help build our democracy, rather than corrode it. And we call on the VCS itself to organise and mobilise to ensure that these things happen.

For more information on the NCIA, check their website

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