Newcastle University e-prints

Date deposited: 22nd December 2009

Version of file: Author final

Peer Review Status: Unknown

Citation for published item:

Baines S; Wilson RG; Hardill I; Martin MJ. They just don’t understand us!’ Learning and reflection from commissioning relationships in the mixed economy of care. In: NCVO/ VSSN Researching the Voluntary Sector Conference.2008,University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.:National Council for Voluntary Organisations

Further information on publisher website:

http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/

Publishers copyright statement:

Use Policy:

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not for profit purposes provided that:

- A full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- A link is made to the metadata record in DRO
- The full text is not change in any way.

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.
‘They just don’t understand us!’ Learning and reflection from commissioning relationships in the mixed economy of care

Sue Baines\(^1\), Rob Wilson\(^2\), Irene Hardill\(^3\) and Mike Martin\(^4\)

Policies driven by central government in England have sought to bring about a step-change in the quality of interaction between government and third sector organisations. In practice this usually means ensuring that the sector increasingly shares responsibility with state agencies for delivering local services to those in need. From the perspective of many Third Sector Organisations (TSOs), contracting for public service delivery can help to ensure reliable income and the opportunity to influence policy. Nevertheless, there are concerns that funding in the form of contracts for services brings significant threats to independence, to relationships with service users, and most of all to the distinctive values of organisations.

While these debates have been energetic and vehement, the evidence base for how public service contracting has actually impacted upon those TSOs that participate is patchy. In this paper we report some of the data and policy implications from *Delivering public services in the mixed economy of welfare: Putting research into practice*. This was a project funded under the Economic and Social Research (ESRC) ‘Impact Grants’ scheme, which is intended to promote practical learning from research. We draw on two sets of data: case studies of TSOs that have had some recognised success in delivering services for older people under contract to public sector agencies in two English regions; and a series of workshops in which representatives of third sector organisations and public sector commissioners participated together.

We focus upon ways in which TSOs have learned, changed and sometimes grown in response to new opportunities in an environment of policy ‘churn’. We explore notions of independence, opportunism and vulnerability as TSOs respond in different ways to the actions of public sector commissioners. Some attempt to influence the environment while others appear largely reactive to it. Case study TSOs typically had multifaceted and sometimes very close relationships with public sector personnel. For example, senior officers of TSOs sat on partnership boards and local fora. Despite evidence of frequent encounters between the sectors at local level, a recurring theme in the case studies and workshops was claims from the third sector that public sector bodies lack understanding of them. Some want to improve understanding while there is also a perception (mainly but not exclusively from the public sector) that it is the responsibility of third sector service providers to understand their public sector ‘customers’. There is widespread consensus that more needs to be done to articulate evidence for what third sector service providers achieve. The metaphor of speaking and learning a ‘common language’ is often invoked to explain these tensions.

---

\(^1\) Reader in Social Policy, Manchester Metropolitan University
\(^2\) Senior Lecturer in Management, Newcastle University
\(^3\) Professor of Economic Geography, Nottingham Trent University
\(^4\) Visiting Professor, Newcastle University
The experiences of individual organisations, we propose, should be understood against the over-lapping webs of interrelationships within and between those providing and commissioning services. These are played out within a range of arenas where differentiations, including diversity in values and organisational positions, are shaped and re-shaped in response to the environment.

Contact:
Susan Baines
Reader in Social Policy
Research Institute for Health and Social Change
Manchester Metropolitan University Hathersage Road
Manchester M13 0JA
Phone: 0161 2472511
Email: S.baines@mmu.ac.uk