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'They just don't understand us!' Learning and reflection from commissioning relationships in the mixed economy of care

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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 multi faceted 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.

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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.

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