

Children's Services Voluntary Sector Re-contracting Process 2008/9

Comments from
Manchester Alliance for Community Care



Background

After the initial phase of the re-contracting project, stakeholders were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire on the work done so far. MACC's response was completed by Ruth Craven our Children and Families Development Worker who was also a member of the funding subgroup which had initiated the process following our recommendations to the Children's Board in September 2007.

What did you think were the strengths of the re-contracting process?

- The fact that it's happening at all! Process developed through recommendations taken to Children's Board in partnership with VCS
- Regular funding subgroup meetings with all key partners
- Communication updates to providers
- Service audit carried out at the beginning of the process
- Improved performance management system including OBA approach
- Workshop days run by Liz Jayne
- One to one meetings with providers
- Regular agenda item on Children's Board

What did you think were the weaknesses of the process?

Finance/Budget limitations

- Delay in budgetary decisions leading to three month delay and organisations only receiving 9 month contracts
- Requirements of funding streams are not aligned or understood
- Lack of clarity around financial mechanisms create cash flow problems for groups

Short term approach

- Inability to put into place longer term planning arrangements
- Strategic lead only in place until June 08 leading to a short term approach with no ability to develop a longer term VCS strategy. Interim period of 2

months with no clear strategic leadership during restructuring made partnership working more difficult to achieve

Opportunity for learning

- Little opportunity for learning (on either side) due to short timescales and lack of a longer term approach
- Process set up in a rush – little time for capacity building with organisations around outcomes
- Admin burden of performance management process too great for organisations without a supporting infrastructure – this may result in poor evidence collected
- Risk that quality of delivery does not improve through the process due to time constraints
- Contracts are extremely inappropriate for voluntary and community sector providers, however no alternative offered due to lack of time to respond to issues
- Lack of experience of contract evaluators – would benefit from additional training and development
- Monthly request for PM information potentially transfers admin costs onto providers
- Proposal form not user friendly
- There continues to be a focus on pushing for short term evidence of change. There is an expectation that organisations will need to prove their impact in less than six months using a new performance management framework. Top down approach does not harness creative thinking from the sector

Capacity to improve partnership working

- Power imbalance in partnership arrangements. VCS recommendations were approved by Children's Board however we continue to experience a lack of ability to put recommendations into practice relating to process improvements
- Understanding of the impact and workings of the VCS is not well understood within the local authority at a senior level
- There is an unrealistic expectation at senior level that the transitional year will produce PM information which will enable commissioners to make decisions about whether the right services are being contracted in the right localities.
- Risk that the focus stays on VCS contracts and not mainstream providers – skews priorities

How could the process have been improved?

- Strategic Lead identified longer term to lead on VCS policy and drive forward a market development strategy for the VCS.
- We need to work to develop the relationship between the commissioner and the provider which is underpinned by trust.
- We need to position this work in a longer term plan – where do we want to be in 5 years time and what incremental steps do we want to take year on year to achieve this goal?
- More capacity identified within the central support team to support organisations to collect PM information
- Critical to the process moving forward is going to be the identification of funding allocation from the ABG.
- A need for plurality of funding arrangements – grant giving for smaller allocations as well as contracts
- Commissioners should focus on the long term outcomes of VCS organisations' work, rather than on hitting short term targets, in order to achieve their aims and objectives for the sector. In order to take advantage of the unique qualities of the VCS, Commissioners need to allow for varied and occasionally unorthodox processes and assess the full breadth of outcomes
- Providers require a longer timescales and support to complete proposal forms
- More comprehensive training and support for panels assessing proposal forms
- More ongoing support to develop capacity of providers in collecting performance management information

Ruth Craven
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