

# **Evaluation of Voluntary and Community Sector Re-contracting Process**

**July 2008**

## **Introduction**

A transitional re-contracting process has recently been completed for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) projects working with children, young people and families receiving funding from sources administered by the City Council. In all 53 projects were re-contracted from 35 different organisations.

The re-contracting process was led by the former Children's Fund programme co-ordinator with support from a small team consisting of Council employees and external consultants: six in total with all but one working on a part-time basis. Six assessment panels were held to assess individual project proposals. Each panel consisted of a range of professional interests with staff drawn from youth work, play, district panel project team, regeneration teams and the Working Neighbourhoods Fund team: 15 in all. Two workshops on monitoring and evaluation were also held to develop organisational practice.

The re-contracting process provided a bridge for a number of different funding streams between the previous grant and commissioning processes that each individual funding stream used and the introduction of the Area Based Grant, which will draw funding streams together into a single commissioning process, with a district focus.

The re-contracting process related to funding for the period April 08 to March 09. The process began in late March 2008 with all projects to be re-contracted receiving a new contract by the end of July 2008.

## **Evaluation process**

To ensure that the learning from the re-contracting process informs future commissioning, a brief evaluation was undertaken with an evaluation form being sent to all organisations that were re-contracted, the assessors who participated in the assessment panels and the members of the re-contracting team that co-ordinated and managed the process.

Responses were received from 15 (43%) of the funded organisations, including one that was on the VCS funding sub group, 5 assessors (33%), and 5 (83%) of the re-contracting team.

The evaluation form asked respondents to identify strengths and weaknesses of the process, any learning that had occurred as a result of their involvement, and suggestions for improvements in the future. This report highlights the key findings from an analysis of the evaluation forms received. The words in *italics* are taken directly from evaluation forms.

## The Findings

### Overall Re-contracting Process

Almost half the organisations felt that the re- contracting process overall had been a positive step forward in promoting a more supportive and effective relationship between providers and commissioners. Comments included:

*Felt like a new beginning – optimism.*

*The process felt more personal than previously; there was feedback on the applications and opportunity to discuss any requested changes and what might be required.*

*The individual and group support process which enabled me to understand what you were looking for in the application. The process fosters a better relationship between contractor and those re-contracted.*

### Timescales

Having a re-contracting process that started at the beginning of the funding period to which it related was identified as a significant shortcoming by many of the respondents. As a result the process felt rushed and led to financial uncertainty for VCS organisations and their staff.

*The whole thing has been very slow and we are four months into the year and have not received anything, so our small project has ended up overdrawn, trying to maintain a service in the area.*

Improvements in the future primarily related to starting the process much earlier, well before the funding period is due to start and giving funding to projects over a longer time frame. Differing views were given about the length of the process itself with organisations requesting a more concise timescale while those in the re-contracting team were concerned that the time needed to support organisations through the process should not be under-estimated.

*In terms of the future, the process needs to take into account that VCS groups need 9 months to replace any funding, so grants need to be given on a three year basis ideally – year on year just doesn't work to create stability in the VCS, but to undermine it, unless MCC can confirm 9 months in advance whether a project will get money. This would work, even if you re-negotiated monitoring required on a yearly basis.*

### Coherence of the Re-contracting process

At times the re-contracting process was felt to lack coherence. The late arrival of the outcomes frameworks, and the need for specific information for the contracts which had not been requested in the original proposal form were specifically mentioned as being problematic.

*Last minute appearance of youth work outcomes framework eroded the meaning attached to the process as paperwork began to overtake process - potentially blocks real process of developing project outcomes that can really turn the curve!*

The lack of coherence was attributed by re-contracting team responses, in part, to the tight re-contracting timetable. Suggestions for the future all stressed the need for a clear framework and adequate planning at the outset.

*That if we are not to confuse providers and co-opted team-members we have to be exceptionally clear ourselves about what we are doing, how and why*

### Training and Support

Training and support available was valued by over half of the organisations, especially the one to one meetings and the monitoring and evaluation workshops. Several organisations mentioned that their skills and confidence in evaluating their work had developed as a consequence.

*The monitoring and evaluation training day - excellent facilitation prepared to re-look at issues raised around monitoring and report back. Good practical activity and exercises to take away and use.*

The need to have support and training available at the start of the process, before proposals are submitted, was highlighted in many responses. The possibility of dedicated support to smaller VCS organisations to help them develop bids was also raised.

*If the individual and group support process was on offer before the application submission date a great deal of time would have been saved on the application form and maybe only one submission needed.*

### Re-contracting Team and Assessment

Over half the organisations identified the re-contracting team itself as a strength, believing them to be approachable, informed, efficient, respectful with an understanding of the VCS organisations.

*The re-contracting team were one of the strengths as they seemed to be very proactive, supportive and understanding of the difficulties the groups were facing during this period. They were always available by phone and responded to emails quickly ensuring that any queries were answered promptly.*

The mix of people involved in both the re-contracting team and assessment panels was also felt to have contributed to the effectiveness of the re-contracting process.

*....having people from different professionalisms and backgrounds in the authority evaluating the bids in teams. This meant that we didn't rely solely on support from the centre but were easily able to request peer support from people with particular professional experience.*

There were, however, concerns that the quality of the assessment process was adversely affected by the large number of staff involved. The depth, breadth and accessibility of the assessors' briefings were also seen as problematic by some assessors, while others found the assessment panels hard work and an additional stress to existing workloads.

*Quality of Assessment: too many people involved in too tight a time scale to quality assure decision-making process effectively*

### Outcomes

Some organisations appreciated the emphasis on identifying outcomes that was stressed throughout the process, and felt it helped them clarify their own work.

*It was helpful for organisation to reconsider how they are able to reach manageable and realistic outcomes (not being over ambitious)*

Others were concerned that the outcomes frameworks were too rigid and that future commissioners would be making judgements based on short-term evidence of change.

*There is an unrealistic expectation at senior level that the transitional year will produce performance management information which will enable commissioners to make decisions about whether the right services are being contracted in the right localities.*

### Performance Management

A number of concerns were raised about the performance management process. These related to wanting to know about the performance management process in advance, not being clear about performance management expectations and the lack of experience of evaluation in funded organisations.

*It would be extremely helpful in future to know in advance, whilst making the application what the monitoring processes are, so we are aware of this in writing the bid and planning work and so we can organise our work and our monitoring processes in advance.*

The administrative implications of the change to monthly reporting and of the performance management process as a whole were also raised. Greater support from commissioners was suggested to improve the quality of performance management across the VCS in the future.

### Paperwork/Contracts

The proposal form and financial spreadsheet were seen as confusing and in need of simplifying.

*I found the eligibility criteria quite confusing as we did not fit neatly into any category.... some of the information required was repetitive..... the financial spreadsheet quite confusing and not very well explained*

The contracts issued to organisations were felt to be inappropriate for this type of work, with the need for more technical involvement on preparing the contracts also identified.

*Contracts are extremely inappropriate for voluntary and community sector providers, however no alternative offered due to lack of time to respond to issues*

## Co-ordination of service provision and funding streams

Some improvement was identified in co-ordinating the assessment of need, service provision and funding streams as a result of having a single re-contracting process for a number of funding streams.

*Many opportunities to interact with projects over issues such as outcomes for children city wide, thinking beyond their individual organisations into the bigger picture of the needs city wide and the opportunities/ strengths for working with other organisations*

It remained a concern for some, though, that the requirements of different funding streams were not aligned or understood and that the re-contracting process did not involve an assessment of need.

*We are pleased to be getting the money, although a thorough mapping needs to be done to make sure that all areas are resourced and that this process is not merely historical.*

## Communication

There was some initial difficulty experienced by a few organisations in having queries answered and finding out about meetings which were seen to be resolved as the process developed.

*How hard it was to initially raise our concerns and to find the route whereby someone could listen to our difficulties in completing the form....*

The importance of good communication with all providers and regular feedback were stressed as areas for improvement in the future.

## Networking

Opportunities for networking and sharing good practice between projects and the chance for assessors to learn more about projects' work were identified as a positive aspect of the approach taken, with some requesting that this should happen more regularly.

*Bring everyone together once in a while to find out what everyone's strengths and weaknesses have been, like a network meeting but in an informal way.*

The networking that took place was also seen as enabling projects to support each other and find solutions together, such as evaluating certain areas of work.

*..... we all have different understandings of the process in general and of outcomes, indicators, measures, etc in particular. Therefore, my learning was a renewed emphasis on the need for shared work and understanding.*

## Strategic Involvement of VCS

Strategic involvement of the VCS in the re-contracting process, through the Children's Board, the funding sub group and in planning the workshops, was identified as an important step in strengthening partnership working, though the need for better VCS involvement from the outset was also mentioned.

*Process developed through recommendations taken to Children's Board in partnership with VCS. Regular agenda item on Children's Board*

Involving the VCS more broadly in developing knowledge and understanding about effective provision in the city was also suggested by one organisation.

*It sometimes feels like there is disconnect between the projects on the ground doing the work and their expert knowledge of what is really possible / achievable through work, what they consider works best with young people; and the current approach of government policy, which can seem to ask the impossible, with LA funders caught in the middle of this. We would value the opportunity to discuss this further.*

### The future of VCS commissioning

The lack of a longer-term framework for commissioning VCS was seen as a significant shortcoming with concern expressed that the re-contracting process had taken place in a vacuum, and that the learning from this process and the relationships build up with the re-contracting team would not contribute to future commissioning.

*Finding out only recently that we wouldn't be continuing with this team in the lead is a big disappointment as it seemed they have listened and been responsive.*

The fact that a number of recommendations, approved by the Children's Board, to support VCS commissioning had not been implemented was also raised. There was a concern that this might reflect the level of priority given to the VCS within Children's Services. A number of suggestions for improving partnership working and trust between VCS and City Council funders in the future included:

- a Strategic Lead to lead on VCS policy, improve understanding of VCS in local authority and drive forward a market development strategy for the VCS
- A plurality of funding arrangements – grant giving for smaller allocations as well as contracts
- A longer term (5 year) plan, identifying incremental steps, year on year, including the early identification of funding allocation from the Area Based Grant.
- A focus on the long term outcomes of VCS organisations' work, rather than on short term targets, allowing varied and possibly unorthodox processes, given VCS creativity and innovation, and an assessment of the full breadth of outcomes.

Having a process that assesses the suitability, viability, and financial risk status of providers before they are invited to submit project bids was also suggested.

### Readiness for commissioning

When asked about the learning respondents had gained by participating in the re-contracting process, by far the largest number of responses referred to their learning about commissioning. For funded organisations this related

primarily to their ability to submit more complete applications, to be clear about their outcomes and to have evidence to support previous achievements, and to ensure that assumptions are not made about the knowledge and experience of the commissioners.

*What is expected of me in the future. To evaluate fully and not to be afraid to say just how good we are.*

*Requirement to break things down further, rather than youth work shortcuts /understanding as might not be youth workers making decisions*

All the assessors felt their understanding of commissioning had improved. Particular issues mentioned included the need to see evidence, ensuring adequate time to process and assess bids and the importance of clearing time in the diary so that commissioning was not an added stress.

*That it takes a long time for the VCS to collate the bids and that support from us was welcome.*

## **Summary**

The design and implementation of the re-contracting process itself built on experience gained by the Children's Fund over three previous commissioning cycles. Less than half the re-contracted organisations had previous experience of the Children's Fund approach, with many of these being used to a more grant giving culture. The re-contracting process, therefore, marked a significant change in approach for many organisations which was positively received.

The timing of the re-contracting, and initial uncertainty about which funding streams would be included, was problematic for funded organisations and for the re-contracting team. The speed at which the process was developed and the fact that it encompassed different areas of work (ie. youth work, parenting and family support, play), some of which the re-contracting team had limited experience of, affected the coherence of the process and reduced the time for effective planning at the outset.

The way in which the re-contracting team operated on a day to day basis was appreciated by the funded organisations as well as the one to one support and training provided. The involvement of assessors from a variety of backgrounds was also seen as a strength.

The emphasis on outcomes and the provision of an outcomes framework helped organisations clarify what they were hoping to achieve. The late appearance of the outcomes frameworks, however, caused confusion as bids had already been submitted. There was also a concern that judgements would be made on the success of projects based on the achievement of outcomes over a very short timescale.

Capacity to undertake effective performance management, and the inappropriateness of the contract issued to organisations, however, were identified as concerns.

The involvement of the VCS in the re-contracting process was welcomed, though there were a number of issues raised about the lack of a longer term plan for future commissioning and the need to pro-actively strengthen the partnership between VCS and the City Council.

Other outcomes of the re-contracting process included a greater readiness of organisations for commissioning in the future, networking and sharing good practice between organisations and some opportunities to improve co-ordination of service provision.

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