

Supporting smaller organisations to compete for commissioning – Aston Mansfield, East London

Aston Mansfield was formed in 2000, out of longstanding community organisations Aston Charities Trust and Mansfield Settlement. It has a commitment to supporting smaller community organisations, and convenes workshops and gatherings for organisations around commissioning from the London Borough of Newham and Newham Primary Care Trust.

CEO Caroline Rouse describes Aston Mansfield as “ a responsive organisation which is not afraid to change, but not prepared to change for the sake of it”. Here she gives us a flavour of how the commissioning process has been working in Newham, and opportunities and challenges for community anchor organisations and the smaller organisations they work with.

Commissioning in Newham: strengths and weaknesses

There is a history of dissatisfaction with the commissioning process; this comes from both infrastructure and community anchor organisations and smaller organisations in Newham.

Playing a supportive role

There is no particular model of engagement or brokerage here, but Aston Mansfield play a supporting role to many smaller organisations, and draws them together on occasions through networking lunches and other workshops. They are also part of a capacity builders’ working group (a sub-group of the local ChangeUp structure), that recently undertook a survey of smaller organisations to assess their response to the commissioning process before and after the process. The resulting report was fairly critical of the process, but was largely ignored by Newham Borough Council, according to Aston Mansfield and the organisations they work with. An independent report was also commissioned by the Council and is due to be published in May 2009.

Challenges

In 2008 Aston Mansfield and other infrastructure organisations withdrew their support to smaller organisations preparing to bid in the latest round of commissioning funded by Newham Council. They all withdrew from the arrangement as the information required to provide effective support to these groups was not forthcoming from the local authority in time.

Collaborate for Commissioning was funded by the IDeA under the National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning (NPTSC).

Aston Mansfield, along with others, felt its professional reputation would be compromised if it were to be involved in delivering support around such a flawed process. In the event, external consultants were brought in and local organisations were not entirely happy with the service they received.

Two of the smaller organisations in contact with Aston Mansfield provide interesting practical examples of commissioning issues. The first, which provides play facilities, has been successful in the tendering process but nearly collapsed under the strain of putting the tender together. They are now trying to extricate themselves from one of the contracts because they consider the reporting requirements and target outcomes to be unrealistic.

The other, which seeks to engage young people in motorcycle display teams, was unsuccessful, and felt that the process lacked clarity, guidance and information, and was unrealistic in terms of requirements.

Opportunities

- Aston Mansfield's role in the capacity building working group gives them a route in to Newham Borough Council, as that group has council capacity builders on it. There is talk of a strategic body forming to look at procurement. Aston Mansfield may be invited to become part of this group and if so, could use its position to push for changes in the system such as more time for tendering, and more of an advance indication of contracts coming up.
 - There should also be a way in which this group could raise the issue of disproportionate monitoring requirements on commissioned contracts.
- The publication of the independent report will provide an opportunity to draw the voluntary and community sector together to examine and comment on it, and discuss next steps. Aston Mansfield could take a lead on this and ensure that local voices are heard and listened to.
- The primary care trust's commissioning process is considered an example of more inclusive and effective commissioning, so the establishment of way to facilitate the sharing of their good practice is recommended.