

bassac Community Brokerage Project: recommendations from community anchors

The commissioning and procurement process: “Not just hurdles, but a steeplechase for small organisations.”

Context

The community brokerage element of Collaborate for Commissioning worked with bassac member organisations that had been involved, to some extent, in working with smaller organisations in tendering for or delivering services.

The project was keen to find out what models were being used, and what could be learned, as well as to provide the chief executives of the organisations with an opportunity to share experiences and take ideas forward.

One key element was identifying support that the anchor organisations felt would be appropriate and beneficial to them and to their smaller partners. Some of this has been developed into a set of web-based resources to support organisations through the process of collaborating for commissioning: see www.bassac.org.uk/collaboration.

Other support needs were identified which require further development by bassac and others, and these are detailed in the recommendations.

Participants

The five bassac member organisations and the chief executives or directors involved were:

Aston Mansfield, Newham, East London: Caroline Rouse

Barton Hill Settlement, Bristol: Joanna Holmes

Birmingham Settlement, Birmingham: Martin Holcombe

North Doncaster Development Trust, Doncaster: Alan Bell

The Zone, Plymouth: Ruth Marriot

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

In Newham and in Doncaster, representatives from smaller partner organisations were also involved in the workshops, namely Dunscroft Unite in Doncaster, and Trinity Centre and the IMPS Motorcycle Display youth organisation in Newham.

The process was facilitated by Helen Garforth of Just Ideas, and involved:

- a meeting in each community anchor organisations to discuss issues and potential support needs
- Research and development of a set of resources to meet those needs, in collaboration with Dave Chapman and the wider Collaborate for Commissioning project.
- A national meeting in Birmingham for all the community anchor organisations to get together and share experiences and discuss resources and recommendations.

For details of the outcomes of the individual workshops, and the challenges and benefits of the various models used by the participating anchor organisations, see the 'Models for collaborative working' sub-section of the Collaborate for Commissioning project on bassac's website where you will find case studies and recommendations from each:
www.bassac.org.uk/collaboration

Key issues

The main constraint to a more engaging and enabling commissioning and procurement arrangement in many cases seemed to be how the process is managed by the local authority or other statutory partner. The fact that timescales are so short between contracts being announced and the deadline for submission for tenders does not allow for true partnerships to be developed in time. There is no possibility of getting a preview of what is in the pipeline, which would at least enable groups of organisations to get together and prepare themselves for tendering.

Other reported constraints are around access to support and resources, and around the capacity of both the anchor and the community organisations to be able to engage in beneficial relationships.

Useful support/resources identified:

These fall into three main categories:

- web based tools or resources - now developed and made available as part of this project on the collaborate for commissioning section. See www.bassac.org.uk/collaboration

- longer term suggestions involving further funding and other initiatives
- suggestions involving working with statutory partners.

There is obviously some overlap, particularly between the second and third categories.

Longer term support recommendations

Relationship brokerage, management or facilitation

An interesting issue to emerge – particularly in respect to the role community anchors play in working with and sub-contracting parts of contracts to smaller voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) – is that of relationship management.

Support to community anchors to establish relationships that support the smaller VCOs to engage and deliver work under sub contract looks as if it would be a valuable part of the commissioning process.

The organisations involved in Collaborate for Commissioning recommend that bassac involve them in developing ideas for how this might work, and secure funding to pilot the idea. One idea would be to pilot a post within a large community anchor, or even shared by more than one, to manage relationships.

Collaboration Benefits and other opportunities

Several of the chief officers of the community anchor organisations involved in this project are also involved in bassac's Collaboration Benefits training and delivery. This is an example of where funding and staff capacity from one source or project could be used creatively to support smaller community organisations in the commissioning process. For example, those doing the Collaboration Benefits training will be required and paid to deliver a certain number of sessions to other organisations around collaboration – these could be focused on the commissioning and procurement process, allowing community anchor organisations to fulfil a capacity building role without additional inputs.

bassac's role here is to keep members informed of opportunities and of the potential for joined-up thinking between different streams and programmes.

Working with statutory partners

Much hangs on the relationship with the commissioning body, and the process that they follow. There was a recognition that this is fundamental to whether commissioning and procurement builds capacity of the voluntary and community sector or whether it drains skills

and capacity. Several recommendations emerged for bassac to consider and communicate to those with an influence on policymaking regarding the commissioning process.

Here, in no particular order, are a set of ideas that came out of the project, that bassac might be interested in taking forward :

Exchange visits between local authorities to share learning and examples of good practice. These would ideally involve the community anchor organisations as well to get everyone talking to each other.

Secondments between local authorities and community organisations so that each understands more fully how the other operates, and what constraints and opportunities exist in each sector.

Co-design not only of services but of the whole commissioning process. Getting local authorities and community anchors and their partners together, with a skilled participatory facilitator and designer, to look at how the process might be altered to be more effective and empowering. There is potential scope for some support from the Design Council, under their Public Services by Design scheme which bassac could explore in collaboration with a local authority willing to take a lead.

Funding for capacity building made integral to contracts – encouraging those putting together the contracts and tendering process to include provision for the lead or consortium organisation to mentor and support smaller local organisations actively. The benefits of this would be a greater reach into the community for the local authority, as well as the capacity building element.

Lobbying national government, or the Local Government Association to put pressure on particular statutory partners to engage with the voluntary and community sector to assess and overhaul the procedures as necessary.

Developing 'alternate models of procurement' such as the community facilitators model developed in Birmingham, to present to statutory partners as examples of an enabling and voluntary sector led approach.

bassac is already looking at focusing further resources on the issue of statutory / voluntary/ community relationships regarding commissioning and procurement, and some of these ideas and suggestions can be taken forward and will influence the process.

Conclusions

One striking point that came out of the discussions between all the organisations involved in the community brokerage project, was a sense of the great opportunities that the role of community anchor presents. It was strongly articulated by participants that anchors have a role to play in brokering relationships so that they facilitate better services, and better capacity of the voluntary and community sector locally.

This meant a number of things:

- Using their relationship with statutory partners to the advantage of the sector as a whole
- Being flexible and innovative – able to take risks based on a strong reputation
- Not giving up or criticising when things don't work out, but looking at how to change aspects of a partnership or a project to make it work
- Not always going for the glory and taking a lead role and the funding that comes with it, but supporting smaller organisations to do so
- Seeing the benefits of partnership in the longer term; not just about winning contracts now, but building a stronger local voluntary and community sector, and a stronger relationship with statutory partners.

Key to this role is the focus on values. While it is important to develop robust and professional business practices and sustainable income generation, it was also stressed that values are crucial. It is these values of supporting the local community that make community anchor organisations unique and also what makes them attractive as partners to both statutory and grass roots partners.

This is a difficult balancing act, but one that is central to the role of a community anchor in the commissioning process.

bassac has a role to play in this – to keep providing a space and a stimulus for member organisations to talk and think about their values, and the role their values play in the continuing development of the organisation and its relationships.