



Notes from the Localism Policy Lunch

29th of June, 2011

Ward Partnerships

Speaker: Cllr Paul Convery, Islington Council

Key points:

The new arrangements are about devolution of responsibility to Councillors, rather than officers, on decision making in their ward. The partnerships will make Councillors more accountable to their ward.

The Council aims to change the strategic direction around eradicating the massive rich/poor divide by getting councillors more involved in decision making.

Councillors and their Ward Partnership must be able to take decisions on the development of Ward Improvement Plans.

Regarding the voluntary and community sector (VCS), Ward Partnerships aim to engage small groups in the spirit of activism, e.g. more tenant activism.

Questions:

1. *Will the Partnerships really be transparent and accountable, and can they work with no funding?*

The Partnerships should be more transparent than previous arrangements, and particularly be more visible and transparent in the wards. They will use face to face engagement and social media to spread their message. There is money available through development funds such as section 106 for the Ward Improvement Plans and Ward Partnerships will be active in decision making on spending in the wards.

2. *How can disempowered disabled people be involved in the Partnerships when they are so ward focused and not across the wider Borough issues impacting them?*

The Council will still want to talk to pan-Borough groups on key issues. Devolution to Ward Partnerships may make it easier to highlight issues for residents in the wards.

3. *Our Ward Partnership hasn't even met yet, so how can the Ward Improvement Plans be ready to sign off?*

The provisional plans are being ratified at the moment. Exercises will be undertaken by the Partnerships to engage their wards in their final Ward Improvement Plans.

4. *What about vested interests in the Partnerships? Isn't there the risk of nepotism and cronyism?*

Councillors can be taken to the Council's standards board and are answerable to the law. The Council is conscious of the importance of standards, and concerned that the loudest voices don't get an unfair amount of the resources.

Community Organisers

Speaker: Jeremy Fennell, Locality

Key points:

See PowerPoint supplied for notes.

Questions:

1. *How will community organisers interact with local voluntary and community organisations? What about their relationship with the host organisation?*

The aim is to be inclusive and to root practice in groups. Organisers will be recruited from within the community they serve. The organisers, though hosted by an organisation, are independent. Locality wants to see organisers in all areas with appropriate hosts in relevant organisations – this does not include public sector organisations due to the importance of independence.

2. *Will these roles be good for Ward Partnerships or are they a threat?*

Paul Convery stated that he thought the Partnerships and Organisers could work well together, even considering the activist role of Community Organisers. It would be good to keep power in check. Jeremy stated that at times the organisers would challenge statutory organisations on issues, and this is an important part of their independence.

3. *Could the money not be better spent? Is this just a new fad and vocabulary in the sector? What would happen after the training is finished?*

This is not just a training course. Organisers will be training and learning on the job. It isn't a lot of money being invested as compared to other national schemes and the aim is to become self-sustaining. In future the roles would be taken on by activists and volunteers.

4. *What is unique about the Community Organisers programme as compared with Citizens UK?*

The Community Organisers programme should compliment the work that Citizens UK does – not aim to duplicate efforts.

5. *Will host organisations be compensated?*

Yes, there would be a small amount of compensation for one year. After the first year there would need to be fundraising to support it.

6. *Can the issue of consciousness raising versus capacity building be clarified?*

What's different is that this programme is about working from the bottom up with individuals. Consciousness raising is about the ability to work together to make a difference – in partnership where appropriate – and listening house-by-house, street-by-street.

Community Right to Challenge and the Practicalities of taking on Council services

Speaker: Jonathan Gibbs, Isledon Partnership

Key points:

Putting aside the crusading and activism side of the Community Right to Challenge, when organisations get to the procurement stage, the three key requirements for a partner organisation are flexibility, reliability and innovation.

VCS organisations need to think practically about making bids work, and keep in mind that the experience of running a service won't be what you think it will be.

Organisations need to have a creative view about risk and in particular financial risk.

Maintaining a good relationship with the Council is critical and must remain open, mature and respectful.

The "cardinal sin" is inflexibility. The Council will expect their partners to show flexibility on issues.

Key focus areas:

- Legal aspects and contracts - Make sure the contract is right, and be prepared to negotiate if necessary. Keep in mind use of land and VAT issues, and the high costs of legal advice.
- TUPE – legally complex but something which can't be ignored and needs legal advice. Again, keep legal costs in mind.
- Business Planning – the business plan required will probably be less sophisticated than what you will actually need. The plan needs proper cash flow work and managers must be on top of the numbers.
- Performance management – quality/performance management is important as the Council will want to know services will be safely and professionally delivered. Have a good quality / performance mark. Remember generally the Council will take the blame for poor service, not the provider.



Keep in mind you become the face of the Council, and this impacts on your independence. "Working with" (common aligned objectives, but separate identities) is a more fruitful relationship than "working for".

Questions:

1. *How can smaller VCS organisations be in a position to take on service delivery?*

Mike Sherriff stated that firstly organisations need to be sure it is aligned with their charitable aims and objectives – should you be bidding? Smaller organisations can link up in partnership with a larger primary bidder, and can offer tailored services focussed on community need. This is an advantage over larger outside organisations that may be able to put in a “flashy” tender.

Jonathan Gibbs stated it is important to maintain the advantages of size, balanced against the importance of roots in the community.

Paul Convery added that local benefits and connection can be an important selling point on bids.

2. *How can small groups effectively negotiate with the Council?*

Be honest and open. Contracts don't need to just be accepted, you should be able to organise a meeting to negotiate any difficult issues.

3. *Regarding assets it can be difficult to raise funds without capital, and this is an issue in areas such as the maintenance of buildings. How can this be approached?*

Make sure you have a lease on the building which has explicit requirements around maintenance. Regarding due diligence, this is a risk area which needs to be factored in and can be challenging especially with older buildings and on the issue of capital expenditure.

4. *How can VCS organisations compete in tenders when larger companies could put forward loss making bids?*

Council's generally won't just go for the cheapest option. They will want to choose the best option for the community, and that is not always the cheapest.

5. *Could small organisations work with larger organisations to reduce their risk?*

This is definitely an option. The tender for Hornsey Baths is an example of a larger lead organisation working with smaller charities to bring in different skills and better community involvement. This is a more dynamic Community Interest Company (CIC) approach.



For questions or comments please contact:

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