

Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service Supporting a collaborative bid

Introduction

Nottingham CVS offered tender support to a collaborative bid from Refugee Action and Refugee Forum. This enabled them to prepare a tender response for an NHS community service to enable refugees and asylum seekers access mainstream healthcare provision.

Richard Hazledine is the Commissioning Officer (Health) at Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service (NCVS) who provided practical support for the collaborative bid.

Development of the bid

The CVS were alerted to the tender opportunity because they are registered with Supply 2 Health, a web portal for NHS tender opportunities. They forwarded the information to local groups via their regular email bulletin and two organisations – Refugee Action and Refugee Forum – got in touch together. They requested support to make a collaborative bid. They already had an informal working relationship and expertise that complemented each other.

A series of four meetings took place with both groups over the course of a month. They were facilitated by the CVS and thus the availability of Richard Hazledine, Commissioning Officer – Health was key to the process. The first meeting included an introduction on how to sell to the NHS and the need to understand the underlying objectives and priorities of the Primary Care Trust (PCT) when responding to a tender. Consideration was also given to the cultural awareness of the NHS and public sector attitudes to 'risk'. The following meetings built up a response to the tender and in particular how the groups could work together on delivery.

After a lot of hard work the tender was successful. Refugee Action is the lead contractor and the Refugee Forum have sub-contracted with them. They have a partnership agreement which underpins the legal contract with the PCT. It's a very simple model agreement and the CVS offered guidance on what it should contain.

Role of NCVS

This was the first time Richard Hazledine had coached two groups through this process and although the method took a lot of time and energy the results were worthwhile. The approach was able to be taken because he felt the organisations would benefit from in depth support to examine the wider issues the tender uncovered, such as the difference in practices, perceptions and language used by service providers and commissioners. Additionally, working with refugee and asylum seekers is a very specialist area with only

a few local providers and so the collaboration had a strong case to demonstrate their ability to provide the service.

Richard thought his most important function was to help the VCS understand how statutory bodies work and to see how they could fit into the bigger picture. He said: *“Without support (the groups) deliver great work but often struggle to communicate how this work overlaps with the strategic agenda interesting the commissioner”*. Richard saw his role was about *“joining up two very different worlds. There can be a disconnect between the two and we help bridge the divide”*.

Tenders often fail because groups don't understand who they are selling to; VCS groups need to think about how their core skills and work fits into the broader strategic picture that statutory sector wishes to fund *“Organisations often talk about their excellent work in terms of ‘making a difference’, which commissioners can find difficult to relate to their priorities. There can be misunderstandings on both sides”*

Success factors

Relationship building is key to understanding and this is an important way the CVS could help. It can be hard for a small organisation to access the right people to talk to within the commissioning body. The CVS have established relationships, facilitated introductions and – crucially – understood the angle commissioners are looking for.

As part of the long-term project to bring down barriers, Richard has developed a procurement training package with the support of a PCT Procurement Manager to help organisations prepare to navigate the process. The PCT has committed to send a Commissioning Manager along to each session to support Richard in delivering the training. This reinforces what he is saying and it also means providers can question them and vice versa. This aids mutual understanding of the issues and challenges underlying stereotypes.

Another key role the CVS can play is as a broker, bringing together organisations to enable all parties to increase their capacity and gain a collaborative advantage. Supporting joint working between frontline organisations enables them to punch above their weight and access contracts that may otherwise go to larger bodies. Richard helped to foster a collaborative bid to clarify the strengths and experience of each other as well as the roles and responsibilities each would acquire through the contract.

All parties agree the CVS played a key part in the successful tender. Bea Tobeleska, Centre Manager, Refugee Forum, Nottingham said *“The support was informative and helpful. The opportunity to have a critical friend to oversee the process was particularly helpful. (It) gave us a clear insight into the documents we should use to frame our services to align with what the PCT was looking for. In the absence of this support our tender would have been much more focussed on Refugee Action and Refugee Forum.*

This would have been to our disadvantage. (we now have) a much clearer idea about the processes, expectations and information required in the bidding process”.

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