



South East Rural Community Councils

Increasing the voice for rural communities

Response from the South East Rural Community Councils (SERCC) on Modernising Commissioning

The Government states that its objective is to: “support the creation and expansion of mutual’s, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises and enable these groups to have a much greater involvement in the running of public services”.

SERCC – The South East ACRE network is delighted to support this objective wholeheartedly. SERCC is a sub-national association of the Rural Community Councils in the SE of England SERCC is a registered Charitable Company with members from:-

- Community Council for Berkshire
- Community Impact Bucks
- Community Action Hampshire
- Isle of Wight Rural Community Council
- Action with Communities in Rural Kent
- Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
- Surrey Community Action
- Action in Rural Sussex

These organisations have been offering both support and front line intervention for many years and have an exemplary record for community engagement and encouragement within the context of the Government’s thinking around the Big Society and Localism. The services they offer range from support for young people, the elderly and vulnerable, transport and access issues, local services including Community Shops and Buildings. Many have run services on behalf of local government and participated in the delivery of central government objectives over many decades and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the current debate.

Introduction

OCS will have received a significant number of responses from civil society organisations that specialise in single service areas and probably an equally large number from generic VCS support organisations. There is little point in SERCC duplicating these responses and will, therefore, concentrate on a concise response specifically in relation to the impact of this area of policy on rural communities.

Q1

The language of the consultation suggests that those who are carrying out this role have not yet fully internalised the philosophy of genuinely engaging communities in co-design of services from initial needs assessment through to delivery. Even to ask the question: should there be a target proportion of services delivered in this way risks missing the point. The implication is that a centralised public sector decides on the priority of what should be done and then commissions services, albeit in a more flexible and community centred way, to deliver. In fact many rural communities have extensive experience of identifying local needs and responding accordingly.

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The challenge has always been to get public sector organisations with rigid delivery mechanisms to engage with local informal delivery and build upon it. The question government should be asking itself is: which services really need to be delivered by the public sector? Integration between service areas is a key question in areas of dispersed population where economies of scale cannot be found but economies of scope can. This requires more holistic commissioning through place based budgets.

However, simply allowing the existing silo approaches of the public sector to be preserved through 'management buy-outs' will run completely contrary to community level service design across multiple service areas – potentially from multiple public service organisations. The government needs to make a choice between these two approaches and not think it can force partnerships between types of initiative that are diametrically opposed.

Q2

The consultation documents suggest that government already knows the answer to this question. However, all the proposed initiatives appear simply to build on a highly centralised approach to simplification. If a local community action group in a single small market town is best placed to deliver a package of integrated services to vulnerable people in its community how will a unified PQQ system or a unified contract finder system help them? What is required is genuinely disaggregated budgets, so there is a level playing field between internal and community providers, and scope for dialogue with public sector commissioners about translating local knowledge and will into a local mode of integrated delivery. Again, government appears to know the difficulties that civil society organisations encounter over competitive price and value vs. scrutiny of overheads but appears unable to enforce a culture change within the civil service and local government officials to counter this.

Q4

For many rural areas a comprehensive roll out of the public sector culture referred to in the consultation as Local Integrated Services is the "holy grail". However, it is quite wrong to see this as a national, top-down, template that can be developed in a small number of pilots and then used everywhere. This is a change of culture within the whole of the public sector that breaks down silo approaches to working and that is largely not compatible with a public sector management buy-out approach. The first key to success will be genuinely local solutions that engage local communities from the start. Local delivery mechanisms will only develop with real community buy-in if local people are engaged in defining the problem and are not the subject of initiatives being dropped on them from above. The next requirement will be complete and honest disaggregation of budgets so that the relative cost of delivery can be honestly compared. Community based solutions can look more expensive when large public sector organisations are able to 'keep' a range of management and overhead costs and only offer marginal costs to local providers with which to deliver.

In making this response we have engaged our colleagues and others to form the responses.

Angela Gilmour, Regional Development Manager



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