



Response to: Modernising Commissioning Green Paper, Office for Civil Society

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/modernising-commissioning-green-paper-published>

The publication of this Green Paper is very timely and reflects a wider change in the role of civil society organisations in their relation with government. The move towards the 'Big Society' offers a clear definition of the scope of participatory democracy and outlines a series of steps forward for stronger partnership between community organisations and statutory bodies. It is increasingly necessary to draw together the skills of all parts of the wider community to ensure that expertise and practical knowledge that exist in many types of organisations can be shared to ensure that services are best able to respond to the needs of citizens and communities.

Major questions:

1. In which public service areas could government create new opportunities for civil society organisations to deliver?

The scope for development is growing and it is clear that there are a wide range of services where civil society organisations are well placed to deliver, this may include local services such as libraries, youth centres, social care, etc. However the basis of allocation of services must be on a full needs assessment including all parts of the community to ensure that all voices are heard across a local area.

The opportunity to form new employee-led mutuals offers a very dynamic model for renewal and can enable links between existing civil society organisations and public sector workers. This enables skills to be maintained and service delivery to be better able to respond to local need. However it will be useful to provide guidance on key steps on how to establish cooperatives and mutuals in an accessible way.

2. How could government make existing public service markets more accessible to civil society organisations?

It will be necessary to provide easily accessible information at the local level on what is required in the bidding process. The crucial change needed is to enable a wider range of organisations to be able to develop a bid and this requires a simple, transparent process that encourages new entrants, some of whom may have a limited track record in public sector contracts.

Furthermore it would be useful to provide guidance to encourage smaller organisations on how they may come together to form consortia in order to bid for medium-size contracts.

3. How could commissioners use assessments of full social, environmental and economic value to inform their commissioning decisions?

In this case it is essential to establish clear criteria on wider value beyond financial assessment. It would be useful to ensure a full value approach that agrees a standard for SROI, as well as including wider social, community and environmental benefit.

In particular, a recognition of the positive impact of local ownership and delivery as part of the commissioning process, would enable smaller local organisations to demonstrate a wider value in the community.

4. How could civil society organisations support greater citizen and community involvement in all stages of commissioning?

This is a crucial process- there are a number of emerging models that can deliver direct engagement and clear needs assessment.

It is essential to have a vehicle to enable citizens to prioritise their own needs, through a balanced assessment including a wide spectrum of views. Local forums that include all major parts of a community can act as a basis for broad base of needs.

Participatory Budgeting (PB) offers a way to engage a spectrum of citizens and to ensure that all views are heard within the process. As budgets are devolved to community/neighbourhood level it is more important than ever to engage communities and service users in the allocation of these services. Pooled budgets can best be delivered by a direct involvement of citizens that draws on their knowledge of local needs. PB is a well-established method for ensuring prioritisation of core services. When carried out across a full budget cycle approach, it enables citizens to understand the decision-making process and engage with local ward members as well as officials.

There is an opportunity for CSOs to act as a catalyst for local decision-making:

1. As expert citizens – CSOs can bring together expertise in key stakeholder areas, such as disability, youth etc. It may be necessary to identify a forum that is inclusive of a cross-section of the community, including expertise from a broad range of community-led groups.
2. As facilitators of the process – specific organisations can act as the facilitators of local dialogue on core service priorities, this includes a community alliance approach which gathers together a range of key views from a geographic area. In this case it is necessary to identify the specific skills of facilitation and meeting coordination.
3. As bidders for services – the process to bid for running a service takes place later in the cycle, after the initial needs assessment has been carried out. This should be seen as a distinct part of the process to enable organisations that have a specific interest in delivering a service to engage in a transparent bidding process. It is clear that the same organisations may be involved in each

stage of the process but there is a need to identify the different skills at each point in the process.