

The Zebra Collective

Response to the Modernising Commissioning Green Paper.

The Zebra Collective is a social enterprise and an equal pay workers' co-operative, based in Plymouth and working mostly in the South West of England. It works to promote its core values of equality, participation and positive communication. Its principal activities are training, facilitation and capacity building.

It currently trains and facilitates front line community and voluntary organisations to increase their understanding of the changing context in which they work, and to build their capacity in the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to act. At the same time it trains and facilitates public service staff in engagement and public participation, and has been running the South West Regional Empowerment Partnership 'Empowerment Good Practice' programme with councils in the SW for the past two years.

It believes that its services will be important in the move to the Big Society, but wonders who will pay for them.

One possibility is winning tenders to continue this kind of work, and hence the collective has a direct interest in modernising commissioning. However it will also be working to help frontline self help groups tender for services, and therefore has an indirect interest in ensuring a process that is easy to understand and fair, and also has the quality of the service at the centre of all it does.

It has therefore picked questions from the green paper to answer below. In essence the answers make these points:

- There need to be bursaries and allocated risk funding for small organisations and new initiatives.
- There should be an agreed % of work going to not-for-profit social enterprises.
- That costs awarded need to cover the whole unit cost of an organisation, not just the direct costs of the project to be tendered for.
- That there is sometimes a lack of trust between commissioners and self-help or other small civil society organisations. This will have to be addressed and will need training and/or facilitation.
- That current procurement processes are meant to be subject to the Compact but often are not. Tenders must be, and be seen to be, genuinely needed, transparent in processes, framed to get the best service and with feedback which genuinely addresses what was needed and educates organisations in how to do better next time.
- That good locality planning would address the issue above, since everyone would be involved in agreeing directions and planning services and therefore know what would be put out to tender and what is required.

- The process needs to be simplified. This includes language used and clarity of design, as well as things like a one off simplified PQQ.
- All services should be checked against the triple bottom line of people, planet, profit. Since Social Enterprises already are, this supports the call for a % of work to be given to them.
- Monitoring should include asking for social and environmental audits, as well as financial reporting.
- Support in the form of training/facilitation will be needed to increase involvement. This will need to be funded.

Specific questions and points from the Green Paper are added below, with comments:

Introducing payment by results across public services; This could be done if there were sufficient start up funding and if the costings are based on the full unit cost of the organisation. Small organisations are less able to take risks than bigger ones, and it could well be the very small organisations which could potentially deliver the most targeted local services – provided by local people to their neighbours and friends. It would be a shame to lose these possibilities because organisations are too small to borrow or to cover their own losses.

Bursaries or a specific risk fund could supply enough for groups to try out an idea with results measured later. If the results are good, then the project could be funded on a longer term basis on payment by results terms.

Setting proportions of specific services that should be delivered by independent providers, including civil society organisations; We would like to see proportions set for all not for profit organisations – social enterprises, charities, co-operatives etc. The full social, economic and environmental impacts of commissioning decisions should be built into the commissioning process, so that e.g. a social enterprise, which creates employment and training opportunities for local people, and reinvests profits in community projects is more likely to win the tenders that will enable it to survive and continue to benefit the local area

What are the implications of payment by results for civil society organisations?

There is no funding to run the service until the results have been assessed.

This does not allow for new and risky projects (which could be the radical ones which change things) to start.

Smaller organisations may not be able to borrow to set up such a risky service

Payment by results would not necessarily cover the core costs of the organisation. The agreed unit cost would have to include all organisational costs.

Which public services areas could be opened up to more civil society providers?

What are the barriers to more civil society organisations being involved?

Most public service areas could be opened up to civil society providers.

Barriers include lack of trust from commissioners who tend to be cautious and favour bigger organisations which they know. These organisations quickly become so big that they begin to look more like private sector businesses and lose their contact with the people they are providing services for.

This lack of trust is reflected in commissioning procedures that require guarantees that small organisations cannot necessarily meet and which are overly long and formal.

This is a quote from a recent Self Help report from the Community Development Foundation.

'Self-help groups often push for a change that is based on their lived experience of a problem. This is frequently at odds with the analysis and actions of those delivering the related public service, who have a different relationship to the problem. This can put professionals and self-help groups in opposition. The result is that groups fail to get the support and resources they need, and the state fails to harness groups' energy and experience – to the detriment of services and service users. There is a crucial role to play in bridging the divide between public bodies and self-help groups.'

Improve the transparency of public procurement opportunities;

This is beginning to happen. In Plymouth we have a sell2plymouth website which allows smaller organisations to access tenders under £25000 from local public services. However it is still hard to know what is coming up, what is required, and what criteria are being used to assess tenders.

Feedback is often cursory and offers a 'score' and reasons which can seem to 'tick boxes' rather than address the quality of service offered. For example, one reason given to us (a Plymouth based company) was that the Leeds based company had 'better local knowledge' of Plymouth. We assume that because they were not local they inserted a paragraph of information about Plymouth, which we had considered too obvious to include. We can learn that lesson, but are concerned that the feedback said nothing about the quality of work offered.

It is really important that there is constant communication between people who might offer services (especially local, not for profit organisations) and those wishing to commission them. Some form of networking community could be set up to do this.

Then tenders need to be accessible, clear (what outcomes are required, in what timescale, what criteria will be used etc), give adequate time, allow questions which are then circulated openly with their answers. Feedback should be meaningful – honestly address what it was about a tender which made it less attractive than the one that was awarded the work, and aim to prepare organisations to tender more effectively next time.

Currently what can seem to happen is that tenders come out of the blue with very short time limits, and the perception is that they are awarded to people who are known to the commissioner or to big organisations who offer less risk.

Introduce a standardised core pre-qualification questionnaire (PQQ) across central government; This would help if it only needs to be done once, and if it can be appropriately simplified for smaller organisations and smaller contracts.

In the implementation of the abovementioned measures, what issues should the Government consider in order to ensure that they are fully inclusive of civil society organisations?

Language. In a discussion on the infrastructure consultation involving 5 small local community organisations we had to use a dictionary twice in one single-clause sentence, to look up 'pro-bono' and 'brokerage'.

Ditto design clarity. Have locality, and headline aims clearly highlighted. Have search engines which will pull up appropriate tenders from simple organisational information.

What issues should the Civil Society Red Tape Taskforce consider in order to reduce the bureaucratic burden of commissioning?

PQQ done once and to the level appropriate for the size of the organisation and the work.
Absolute transparency – compact fully implemented to ensure access and fairness.
Constructive and relevant feedback to help organisations tender better.

Involve local civil society in the design of required services so that people know what is needed and whether they can do it. Locality based on-going discussions of needs, directions, services needed, outcomes and monitoring – to ensure that commissioning is part of a process that is seen and understood as people running their own neighbourhoods and lives.

How can commissioners achieve a fair balance of risk which would enable civil society organisations to compete for opportunities?

Have some funding for new initiatives, often suggested by grassroots organisations, which is considered risk funding. It could be allocated simply, with outcomes suggested and checked. Successful projects can go on to be larger scale.

There is something here about perceptions. Larger, or better known, organisations are more likely to be funded for work than smaller self help organisations. The latter are sometimes unruly and emotional – this does not mean that they can't provide a service. It probably means that they are focused on action and feel a sense of urgency – which could mean that they will do a great deal. However it is hard for commissioners to see this, and their easiest route is to award a contract 'safely'. So, as above:

- Have strong local network planning groups which mean people know each other and know what is needed and have a shared investment in the outcomes.
- Provide some training or facilitation for both self-help groups and commissioners, so that they can appreciate the very different views they have of the same service.
- Have open and transparent tender processes and feedback, as well as later reports on what was achieved.

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

See quote below from Green Paper:

'Understandings of value should be driven by citizens and communities, wherever appropriate. This will enable commissioners to focus services on the social, environmental and economic priorities of the people they serve.'

Hence the advantages to the community and environment should be obvious if good locality planning is happening. However it can be ensured by having standard questions on all tenders. How will it help the community? How will it improve the environment? How will it be value for money? It should be easy enough to build up an expectation that these three aspects need to be seriously addressed and monitored. This is especially so if there is a directive to give as much work as possible to Social Enterprises, which as a matter of definition have this triple bottom line. They should also be used to doing Social Audits to monitor their work. Monitoring required by tenders can ask for this kind of feedback on the project.

How could civil society organisations facilitate, encourage and support community and citizen involvement in decision making about local priorities and services commissioned?

This is what the Zebra Collective (a Social Enterprise and Workers' Co-operative) does as part of its equality, participation and equality agenda. It runs through all our work, but especially relevant here is work with small groups to equip them to involve their community in decision making, and work with local authorities to encourage inclusion. This is on our website www.zebra.coop under 'Participation Training' and 'Projects → Empowerment'. Three extracts are printed below.

Community Facilitators This course will enable people to involve others from their community in decision-making for and about their community. It builds on years of practice in community development work and engagement work in this country and overseas.

Participants will learn about the principles and process of good engagement work, find out how to include and empower people, develop facilitation skills and have the chance to try out lots of methods and tools. They'll also work on a small, but real participatory project. Everyone will also receive a comprehensive manual which supports the course content.

The course is ideally suited to groups of people who are about to embark on a project in their local community or community of interest. It can be delivered to suit your group and what you're planning to achieve.

Toolbox For Community Activists Community activities and projects need skilled, confident and committed people

This is particularly important now in ensuring that smaller or minority groups have a voice. In an increasingly tough environment these groups need to increase their chances of being sustainable, being able to bid for public sector contracts and building strong partnerships.

This course is a series of workshops which build people's skills and confidence for community organising and activism. It is designed to be flexible enough to fit the needs of various organisations, and can be put together to suit a specific group.

Empowerment Good Practice Programme

The Empowerment Good Practice programme aims to help local authority staff, managers and elected members increase their skills and confidence to develop more empowering authorities by:

- Developing knowledge and understanding of empowerment principles and practice
- Developing facilitation skills and the confidence to use these
- Promoting a culture of empowerment across local authorities

The programme is funded by the Regional Empowerment Partnership and REIP and is free to participating local authorities. It is designed to complement Connecting Communities and TSEP projects where these are happening. It's a flexible programme and one of the Zebra facilitators will work with you to develop a package of training and support. Support previously offered includes:

- Training in facilitation skills and methods
- Training in community engagement methods
- Introduction to community research and community researcher training

- Training for front line staff on the importance of good community engagement and their role in this
- Training for elected members on the Duty to Involve / their role as Community Leaders
- Facilitation of events that bring together officers, members, partners or community representatives
- Mentoring for key members of staff
- Free region-wide learning and networking events

Comments on the programme:

- Practical Tools for Community Engagement workshop: I was thoroughly impressed with the day. I have been on a couple of similar courses but learnt much more within this session. I particularly enjoyed learning about the practical tools and having the opportunity to work within a group to 'test them out'!
- Community Leadership workshop: I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the course. The content was great and the interactive workshops were fantastic. I have been to a few change/communication/engagement workshops over time but haven't come away as excited and enthused as I was at the end of yesterday's session!
- Facilitated "kick start" project workshop: We think she has done a fantastic job, initiating our project around 'influencing decisions'. Bringing her in as an independent advisor has really helped to kick-start the project and she has provided an impartial voice which has helped to convince some doubters about the value of empowerment work.

We consider these kinds of training/facilitation to be vital to the growth of a Big Society, and would like to see some way in which they can be commissioned.

What forms of support will best enable statutory partners and civil society organisations to improve their working relationships?

Again this is work which Zebra does. We are particularly interested in the CDF Self Help report quoted above

'Self-help groups often push for a change that is based on their lived experience of a problem. This is frequently at odds with the analysis and actions of those delivering the related public service, who have a different relationship to the problem. This can put professionals and self-help groups in opposition. The result is that groups fail to get the support and resources they need, and the state fails to harness groups' energy and experience – to the detriment of services and service users. There is a crucial role to play in bridging the divide between public bodies and self-help groups.'

We have encountered this level of misunderstanding many times and it can lead, as the quote suggests, to a complete failure to harness resources, and worse, to anger and opposition.

Specific opportunities can be provided for statutory partners and civil society organisations to work together, and to be facilitated so they can hear each other. This could happen in Locality Planning Groups, but we would suggest that specific training sessions, either separately or together, will make it more certain that it can. Again, Zebra could do this work, if it is funded.

Meanwhile we include work on conflict resolution and solution focused communication throughout all our courses, with the aim of allowing people to listen to each other and understand and respect different perspectives. The ultimate aim of this is to encourage

collaboration, where the best understandings of a range of perspectives can work together to get a previously un-thought of solution.

We would also urge that the CDF (Community Development Foundation) Self Help report recommendations are followed up by government.

What can civil society organisations contribute to the roll out of Local Integrated Services?

What barriers exist to realising this contribution? How can these barriers be removed?

Barriers include (as above):

- Attitudes of 'professionals' to 'amateurs', and the other way round.
- Playing safe
- Inability of public authority officers to cope with hostility or opposition, and the possible knee jerk reaction of exclusion.
- Mismatch between timescales, with Public Authorities not responding quickly enough to issues that seem important to civil society groups and communities, and small groups needing time and support to develop/share infrastructure.

'Civil society organisations play an important role in enabling people to assume this control. In particular, organisations led and operated by service users and their carers can enable people to come together, aggregate their budgets, develop responsive services and advocate for their needs.'

We would repeat that we see a role for organisations like ourselves to provide training and facilitation to enable this to happen. We would therefore like to see some possibility of this being funded.

What contributions could civil society organisations make to the extension of personal budgets across a range of service areas?

What changes do both commissioners and civil society organisations need to make to adapt to an environment where citizens are commissioning their own services

Local self help groups can provide much of what service users might like to buy (visiting services, relief care, shopping, reading groups, dog walking etc). They might need help in setting up as social enterprises, but if they do they could provide both work and services for local people.

They need:

- Ability to see what the service could be and to cost it effectively, which might mean some expert help
- This may also be needed in support in setting it up
- Access to directories or other places where potential clients can see that the service is offered.
- Commissioners and social care professionals to be promoting access to those directories for people buying services.
- Monitoring to be done by number of people either continuing with the service, or leaving it and buying another.
- Personal budgets to be assessed in relation to real cost of buying services.
- Payment of unit costs to be at a realistic level to support small organisations.

We have recently run a course of 6 free workshops for civil society organisations to prepare them for this change. These focused on the effective running of an organisation, the

changing context they exist in and ways of being sustainable in this new world. Most of the organisations which took part could see ways they could cater for individual budgets, and had ideas to do that. They needed more business like ways of assessing cost, possibly mergers with others to provide centralised affordable admin, and ways of linking with people with personalised budgets. They said that there needed to be an easily accessible register of 'experts' offering free help which linked to organisations asking for it, and the same for people offering social care and people with individual budgets trying to buy it.