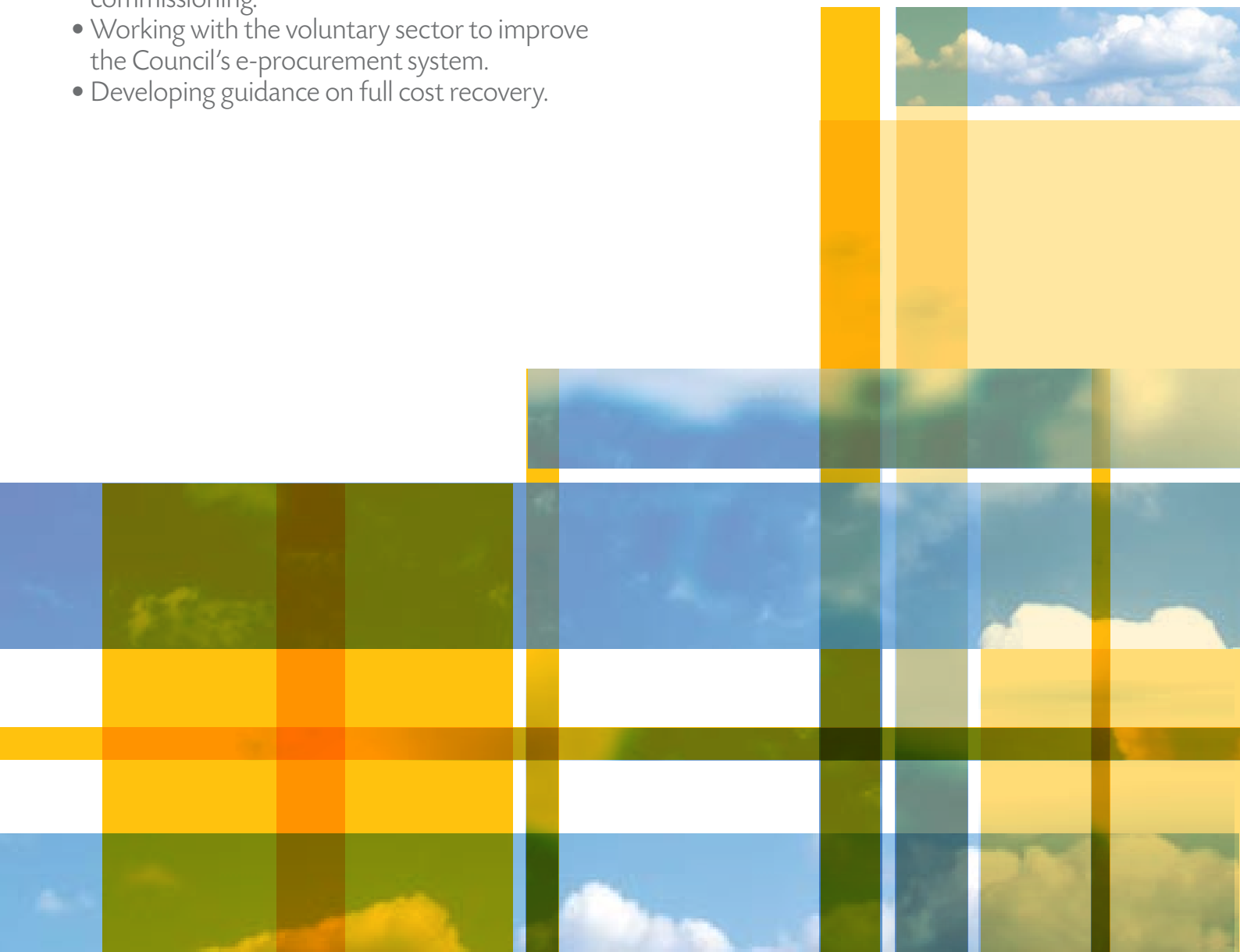


Case Study:

Bristol City Council

Key themes

- Building relationships between the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector around commissioning.
- Working with the voluntary sector to develop a joint provider training on outcome-based commissioning.
- Working with the voluntary sector to improve the Council's e-procurement system.
- Developing guidance on full cost recovery.



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Summary

The Joint Commissioning Unit of Bristol's Children and Young People's (CYP) Partnership has worked in collaboration with a local third sector infrastructure agency, VOSCUR, to develop and deliver training on outcome-based commissioning for third sector providers. This reflects training undertaken by commissioners themselves, as the CYP Partnership introduces an outcome-based approach to delivery of the Children's Trust priorities. Other joint work between the Council and the third sector in Bristol has led to: the revision and re-launch of the local Compact; fresh consultation on the funding and commissioning sections of this agreement, including steps toward a shared approach to full cost recovery; and improvements to the Council's e-procurement system. It is too early to say what the impact of this work will be but it is already enhancing constructive dialogue between third sector providers and commissioners.



Voscur

This case study is based on interviews conducted on 15th October 2008 with: Sabrina Lee, Funding Advisor, VOSCUR; and Nicola Waterworth, Senior Policy Officer, Children & Young People's Services' Joint Commissioning Unit, Bristol City Council.

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Background

Bristol City Council, like many local authorities, has a whole range of funding arrangements with a wide variety of voluntary and community organisations (VCOs). With the introduction of the Children's Trust model, Bristol partners were keen to develop an outcome-based approach to commissioning which would also make financial relationships more transparent and systematic in future. The Joint Commissioning Unit, set up to deliver this new approach, brought in the Centre for Public Innovation to deliver training to CYP commissioners on outcome-based commissioning. There was a clear recognition that the new approach would only work if the provider market also had access to training. VOSCUR, which is one of five local infrastructure organisations in Bristol's ChangeUp consortium, was identified as the agency best placed to work with the Joint Commissioning Unit to develop and deliver this provider training. Although initially intended for all providers, 95% of participants to date have been from the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

Training on outcome-based commissioning

The training was developed jointly by VOSCUR and the Joint Commissioning Unit with the support of the Centre for Public Innovation and input from already trained commissioners and other infrastructure agencies. The half day training course includes:

- An introduction to commissioning: what it means and the principles behind it
- The context for change
- The commissioning cycle and an active exploration of the ways that organisations might contribute at different stages
- An explanation of the outcomes-based approach and an active exploration of how organisations' own outcomes might be evidenced
- Introduction to the tools being introduced by the CYP Partnership to design services with results based accountability

The training course was piloted with two groups and revised on the basis of their feedback, before being run a further six times, between June and September 2008, with around twenty participants in each session. The training, which is paid for by the Council through the Joint Commissioning Unit's training and development budget, is co-delivered by Council and VOSCUR staff. It includes presentations from Senior Commissioning Managers who have been trained in outcome-based commissioning and are able to talk about their plans to put the new approach into practice.

Attendees are given a resource pack which includes a glossary of terms, materials related to the course content and contact details for key commissioners. The training is intended to empower participants by giving them the knowledge and insight they need to influence and participate in the new commissioning processes. The training also provides an opportunity to:

- Build relationships between commissioners and potential providers
- Develop a shared understanding of terminology and respective challenges
- Gather intelligence about third sector needs and concerns which can feed into strategic decision making.

The Joint Commissioning Unit has also started to run Visioning Days/Sessions around specific tender exercises. These are open to all potential providers and are widely advertised, including to third sector organisations via infrastructure mailings. They provide an opportunity for commissioners to explain what they are hoping to commission, answer questions and gain useful feedback from potential providers. They are also helping to build relationships and better mutual understanding. These provide an opportunity for commissioners to explain what they are hoping to commission, answer questions and gain useful feedback from potential providers. They are also helping to build relationships and better mutual understanding.

'The Council is really starting to recognise the potential value of the sector as a provider. This training is about trying to strengthen the provider base'

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Building on the Compact

Supported by the Council's Community Development Department, VOSCUR has also worked with commissioners across the local authority on issues of full cost recovery.

Two consultation and training days were held for a mix of third sector organisations and commissioners toward the end of 2007. CA Plus – Community Accounting were brought in to deliver the training and raise awareness of full cost recovery in both sectors. Consultation and subsequent work with the local Finance Forum has helped to develop guidance on cost allocation and opened up discussion about eligible and ineligible costs in funding bids. The resulting guidance, which consists of a simplified version of the tools developed by ACEVO and others, has been included as an appendix to the draft Bristol Compact - Funding, Investment and Procurement Code of Practice. The revised Compact and the consultation on this new draft code were launched at an event earlier this year, which was well attended by a mix of local commissioners and third sector organisations.

Bristol's VCS Project Board

Bristol City Council has a cross-departmental VCS Project Board. Set up in 2007, this group aims to improve practice across the Council when working with VCS providers. Specific areas of work include lead funder and lead commissioner arrangements across the Council. The lead funder approach is intended to reduce the monitoring burden where organisations receive funding from more than one Council source for different activities. The lead commissioner approach attempts to identify the synergies between activities funded by different parts of the Council where a more integrated tendering approach might be developed.

The VCS Project Board has also been working with VOSCUR to improve the Council's E-procurement system for supplier, tender and contract management. This on-line portal allows potential providers to register their details and their areas of interest and to receive information about forthcoming procurement opportunities directly. The system has been in place, for management of commercial contracts, for several years. To ensure greater fairness and transparency, the intention in future is for all funding and procurement activities to be published on this system. VOSCUR has been working with the VCS Project Board to make the language and the categories on the system more third sector friendly. VOSCUR will also deliver three training sessions to show third sector organisations how this system works.

Challenges

Moving to outcome-based commissioning is a big cultural shift. Improving the dialogue between commissioners and providers is important to the success of this approach. It has been necessary to overcome some reticence on the part of both commissioners and VCOs to engage in this dialogue. For commissioners, it can be daunting to talk to VCS colleagues at an early stage, before you are able to say exactly what will be commissioned or what the changes will mean for individual organisations. Inevitably, amongst the VCS, there has been some scepticism about the nature and the motives for this change. This is particularly the case where organisations may have had bad experiences with local authority funding in the past. However, following the training, many could see how the new commissioning approach could present opportunities for them to propose ways of doing things that are very much in line with their mission. The process and the dialogue has, on the whole, been really positive.

Some commissioners and finance staff still need to understand the third sector better if there is to be a positive on-going relationship. Co-ordinating processes within Children's Services, let alone across the authority as a whole, is of course a huge challenge. Time constraints, capacity, political and financial change all potentially impact on the progress of this agenda. The current financial climate is also a challenge. Tight budgets and uncertainty can lead to greater risk aversion and less enthusiasm for new ways of working. There is always a risk that if progress is too slow partners on either side might lose faith.

'Implementing change is a long journey. We have to skill ourselves up as commissioners and I think it's really important to be out there having the conversation as we do so'

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Top Tips for success

Having successfully developed and delivered the joint provider training, these are some tips from Bristol colleagues:

1 Work jointly with public/third sector partners: Model the kind of collaboration you want to see others achieve and take the chance to learn from one another.

2 Design your training with input from commissioners and the third sector: Make sure you talk to third sector organisations about what they think they need.

3 Build learning into everything you do: Use pilots, evaluation and review meetings to reflect the fact that developing new ways of working is an on-going learning process.

4 Open as many channels of communication as possible: Involve commissioners in the training, take opportunities to bring people together and provide contact details wherever possible.

5 Be honest about the limitations: People need to be aware that change will take time, it presents a steep learning curve for everyone and there may be other external constraints along the way.

6 Share your learning and materials whenever you get the opportunity: Adapt what you have done for different audiences to maximise the impact of the work.

The support of an expert external agency in developing the training and mentoring the trainers through the pilot stage has also proved really helpful.

What next?

Building on the work so far, plans for the future include:

- The Joint Commissioning Unit feeding its progress and learning into the Council's wider strategic review of the way the Council does business in future.
- VOSCUR adapting and delivering the outcomes-based commissioning training content to a wider VCS audience i.e. beyond those working in the CYP field.
- Jointly reviewing the training with infrastructure partners to identify what more may be needed. Topics for further exploration may include more training on evidence and monitoring and on approaches to collaboration and consortium bidding.
- VOSCUR is already planning to work with commissioners and providers to examine different models of consortia and provide training on effective consortium management.
- The Joint Commissioning Unit plans to improve feedback mechanisms for applicants who are unsuccessful in the new tendering processes so that lessons are learnt and potential barriers identified.
- A cross-departmental group of commissioners from the Council have come together to discuss approaches to commissioning from the VCS. This will be the focus of a workshop and further dialogue with the sector at VOSCUR's 2008 Annual Funding Fair.

It is too early to say much about the impact of the training in terms of delivering outcomes because the new approach to commissioning is only just being implemented. However, it is certain that the training has increased the dialogue between providers and commissioners and has improved levels of respective understanding. Other issues that commissioners and providers might need to work through in future include: further agreement about how to handle full cost recovery and added value; better understanding of the implications of commissioning (eg. for smaller organisations); and the capacity of the sector to engage in the commissioning process as well as the delivery of services. What partners in Bristol have in their favour is that they have started the dialogue and are already supporting each other to model a positive process of change.

'Obviously there are more questions to ask but I feel the training was a valuable and welcome start to an interesting process of improving services for young people.'

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What next for you?

- Do you understand what is meant by outcomes based commissioning? And is this something that it might be worth exploring with providers/commissioners in your area?
- Are there things you could be doing to get commissioners and third sector organisations in your area together more often?
- Are there parts of the commissioning architecture in your area that need to be adapted or explained better to third sector organisations (eg. like Bristol's E-Procurement System)?
- Are there any examples of good practice in some areas of commissioning locally that could be shared more readily with others?
- Are there any opportunities to develop joint training on any of these things?

Find out more

- VOSCUR:
www.voscur.org
- Presentation and training materials:
www.voscur.org/commissioning
- Bristol Compact documents:
www.voscur.org/compact
- Centre for Public Innovation:
www.publicinnovation.org.uk
- CA Plus - Community Accounting:
www.caplus.org.uk
- Bristol E-Procurement System:
<https://procurement.bristol.gov.uk/index.jsp>
- Results-based accountability:
Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough by Mark Friedman, Fiscal Policy Studies Institute (2005) or
www.resultsaccountability.com

The Sustainable Funding Project is an NCVO initiative working in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund and Charity Bank

The project encourages and enables voluntary and community organisations to explore and exploit a full range of funding and financing options to develop a sustainable funding mix.

The Sustainable Funding Project
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp

T: 0800 2 798 798

E: sfp@ncvo-vol.org.uk

This case study forms part of NCVO's Public Service Delivery Network's work to develop tools and spaces for the improvement of procurement and commissioning relationships between the voluntary and community sector and the statutory sector.

For further information about the work of the Public Service Delivery Network visit www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/psdnetwork or call the Sustainable Funding Project on 020 7520 2411. these things?

The Sustainable Funding Project is supported by:



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