

ENABLING SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMME

FINDINGS FROM LONDON WORKSHOP #2: CHANGING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Findings from London Workshop #2: “Changing roles and relationships: Should we learn to let go?”, 14 September 2018

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ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is working in partnership with the universities of Sheffield and Hull on Phase 2 of the Enabling Social Action (ESA) programme. We are collaborating with local authorities to support them to co-design, co-produce and co-deliver services with local people, service users, and civil society organisations, to embed social action in their routine working. The programme will support commissioners through a range of activities:

- Action learning partnerships with 6 local authorities to support new ways of delivering services.
- Champions who will share learning and insights and galvanise local networks through events.
- 6 national events to bring together a growing peer network.

WORKSHOP #2

Our second workshop took place on 14 September 2018 in NCVO offices, London and was co-hosted with Greater London Authority (GLA). The workshop was well attended with 75 delegates registered for the event. The theme of changing roles and relationships emerged from discussions from our first workshop in Birmingham as well as our initial scoping research. Rather than focusing on where relationships are strained or broken we wanted to focus on the strategies for overcoming barriers in working together to improve outcomes through co-production with communities. Our panel of presenters were Dawn Plimmer, Collaborate, Nick Gardham, Co Ltd and Julia Slay, GLA who engaged the audience with their perspectives on the shifting relationships between a range of actors including local authorities, VCSEs, and communities. In breakout sessions we explored different roles within social action and their potential impacts. Sessions were recorded with permission from participants and quotes used in this report have been anonymised. The following section explores the key findings from the sessions. It builds on our scoping findings and first workshop report¹.

¹ Enabling Social Action Scoping Research Findings: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/management/esa/research>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commissioning practices are changing. So what more can be done to facilitate change? The main strategies for change which emerged from workshop discussions were:

- Encouraging more ‘agitators’ to create excitement around social action and bring commissioners on board to make changes
- Allowing commissioners the freedom to let go of over-managing, move away from convention and encouraging them to take risks to try new things and thereby changing the culture of commissioning
- Shifting focus from output to outcome focused results by valuing broader and experiential impacts.
- Shifting from competitive to collaborative approaches to commissioning by working *with* rather than against key stakeholders involved.
- Building trust in the process of co-production by demonstrating where it can work well. Improving trust in relationships and the ways people work together with more flexible and open interactions.
- Redefining and changing perceptions of roles across sectors (both by role holders themselves and to change public perceptions of what they can do)
- Having conversations where local people are. Place is important and interactions need to happen *in* communities.
- Creating space and learning opportunities to understand local social action initiatives.
- Providing adequate support, training and information for enabling social action rather than assuming individuals know how to.
- Building on the skills developed through proper training and support to boost confidence
- Recognising that it doesn’t need to be big. Small and “quick wins” can help build confidence and encourage more engagement (eg. with elected officials)
- Replicating good ideas rather than reinventing the wheel
- Sharing toolkits for measuring impact and considering qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods of demonstrating evidence. Community and voluntary sector using robust evidence to convince and persuade commissioners of the value of social action.

MAIN FINDINGS

The workshop event focused on 'Changing Roles and Relationships' and strategies for all actors in making key changes. Discussions at the first workshop in Birmingham contributed to framing the challenges and shaping the core issues, potential and barriers. The second workshop in London built on these discussions as a basis for looking at *how* we develop strategies to changing relationships and share participants' experiences and skills to help others overcome obstacles in working with others collaboratively. What was clear from participants was a willingness to adapt to change and to share learning and strategies which are already being implemented across different regions.

A key theme within the Birmingham workshop discussion was a feeling that we are trying to tackle 21st century problems within 20th century structures and evaluation framework. Hence while we are coming up with innovative solutions it is proving challenging to implement these more broadly and to demonstrate successful impact. As a consequence we need to look at how we address these challenges and create systems, processes and measures that are more reflective of the current context.

During breakout sessions participants worked in one of 4 groups and each group was given the list of roles outlined below and asked to select two roles they would most like to examine and why.

- elected officials,
- senior executives and directors,
- middle management (eg head of service, managers),
- frontline local authority and community development roles.
- Umbrella VCSE,
- National VCSEs,
- Small and medium community organisations,
- Funding Organisations
- Central Government Funding programs

For each of the roles selected participants were asked to consider the following questions:

- What are the central aspects of their selected roles?
- What are the main priorities in this role?
- How does this produce positive impact for social action?
- How does it produce negative impact for social action?
- Why does it need to change?
- What are the main aspects of the role that need to change?
- What potential strategies could be used to create change?
- Are there any examples within the group of how this has worked in practice?
- Why might these changes be difficult to achieve or be resisted?
- How might this be overcome?

In the final feedback session, groups summarized their discussed with the whole group. There was some variety in the roles that groups chose to examine including senior executives in local authorities and VCSEs, middle managers, elected officials, umbrella VCSEs and small and medium community organisations. While not a comprehensive list, the business sector was identified by some participants as missing from the original list. Some also felt that citizens or members of the public should be on the list but one group later explained that as they were representing professionals they would not be able to represent community members necessarily.

Culture change

As one participant summarised: “How do we move beyond good intentions of working in partnership to removing the practices which we do as public sector that damage the voluntary sector?” Across the groups participants shared strategies to address this question of how best to change practices. Change in commissioning is happening and there was recognition that the “role of the commissioner is necessarily changing.” Moreover, commissioning is to be understood broadly: “When we are looking at commissioning we’re not just looking at the role of the council but also the CCG as well and other groups which are commissioning including sometimes the voluntary and community sector orgs” It also involves redefining commissioning to see the community as core in co-designing, co-delivery and shaping the agenda: “To go back to basics on what is commissioning- it is making the best possible use of available resources. So if we are going to do that in a meaningful way involving the community at every step of that commissioning

process and not just as a potential deliverer of services but shaping our understanding of the problems faced by our society”

However, despite the big strides made to new ways of commissioning, barriers persist. A key issue was that culture change needed to happen at all levels, from senior managers, to middle management and further down the chain. Middle management, though used broadly, for example, were seen as playing a critical role for those with power as budget holders: “If you can’t change them it doesn’t matter how much interest you have from chief execs and elected members and how much commitment you have from the troops on the ground if the budget holders aren’t going to shift.”

There appeared to be various levels of being ‘stuck’ behaving in certain ways and a change in mindset and culture would challenge this. It was argued that we need to look at and understand the personal backgrounds and motivations of those in senior leadership roles within local authorities but to some extent in VCSEs as well, showing that there are systemic problems across sectors. Senior leaders may be focused on career progression and this short term singular view means not focused on long term engagement with communities. Traditional recruitment process and criteria means senior leaders with similar backgrounds and personal ambitions repeatedly move to these roles so little change happens, as was summarised in one of the working group sessions: “A lot of middle class white people having a common language, a traditional recruitment process and criteria and short term looking to move themselves up the process which didn’t lend itself to a long term engagement with the community.”

Strategies for change

A number of strategies to change cultures and relationships in commissioning were proposed:

Changing places

Senior leaders have been seen as living in a “different cultural world” and being far removed from communities to “ever really interact and engage and understand some of the challenges those communities face.” Senior leaders need to be more connected and less distant to bridge the gap with engaging with communities effectively. One simple way of doing this is for commissioners to have conversations with local people and spend time *in* the places where local people are.

Permission to try new approaches

However, despite these simple recommendations, it is not always straightforward. Commissioners are likely to be under pressure of a number of targets, time and financial restraints. “We need to change targets we need to change the outlook and focus.” If commissioners do not feel they have the freedom to move away from convention or permission to take risks and try new things then they fall at the first hurdle. Making these permissions explicit is one simple way to start to change the culture of traditional commissioning.

This means having a “clear mandate for change.” While recognising complexity in commissioning it was suggested that commissioners need to embrace risks and relinquish some control over processes. It is important for commissioners to “understand the organisation they’re managing” but they need to avoid over-managing “in every detail ...because you can’t anyway.” Commissioning practices are changing and improving but more needs to be done: “We’re seeing a shift from output to outcome focused results and we’re seeing increased risk taking.”

Spaces to learn

Linked to both permission to try new things and going into places where local people meet is creating space and learning opportunities for senior leaders to understand their communities better: “to get their heads up from the monitors and spreadsheets and actually learn about all the good things that are happening.”

Reconsidering more flexible spaces for engagement and interacting *within* communities applies to commissioners but also elected officials: “traditional surgeries aren’t the best ways to enable social action but going out and talking to people where local people are.”

Being an ‘agitator’

Senior leaders need to get excited to actively make changes and be the change rather than risking doing nothing and instead sticking to the status quo and blaming not having time, restrictive budgets and targets for inactivity: “we want to change these people to be agitators”. It sometimes takes a spark to ignite some

of the excitement of social action and this can be lit by another commissioner in a growing network of like-minded individuals, an outspoken elected official or member of a community or local VCSE. These 'agitators' need to encourage other senior leaders championing change in commissioning processes get excited and engaged with social action initiatives in their communities. In turn these commissioners become agitators themselves and convince others to join "the revolution."

Support and training

Elected officials need support, training and information. It should not be expected or assumed that they know how to enable social action: "there's often an assumption that they know what they're doing because they've been elected and they've got that mandate but it may not necessarily be there."

Adequate support and training builds confidence to try new things. Another strategy is to build on small successes. While the achievement may be small these can be effective in snowballing social action. For example, 'quick wins' can help elected officials to "get that warm fuzzy feeling for social action and be able to go out and replicate that across their wards."

Sharing and replicating ideas

There was recognition that it is not always necessary to 'reinvent the wheel' and actually replication of good ideas is a good thing. Participants shared where they had endorsed other local authorities ideas for promoting social action. For example, one local authority adopted a crowdfunding approach similar to that in another.

Sharing measurement tools and demonstrating impact

Sharing ideas for assessing impact was another strategy for making significant changes. Participants discussed how more can be done to demonstrate the return on investment, volunteering hours, time and money saved by going through umbrella VCSE organisations. In turn this conveys an important message about the value of umbrella organisations and links with changing perceptions. A proposed practical strategy would be to share a toolkit across umbrella organisations to measure these aspects. Participants

discussed the challenges of measuring the “immeasurables” and how to measure the “human impact”. One example of successful use of measurement tools came from a local authority where a VCSE was threatened with closure due to funding cuts and subsequently had the decision overturned through demonstrating its value for money. In this case what made the difference was: “a bit of stats and human experience brought it together to make it a powerful argument.”

Changing faces

Another key strategy was around improving perceptions around roles. While the priorities of umbrella VCSE organisations are likely to be around survival and financial stability there is a need to celebrate and recognize the important work they do. It was suggested that a “PR overhaul” may help to highlight their key role in enabling social action. It was argued that how umbrella VCSEs present themselves to others is critical: “how they talk about themselves to different people so externally to the wider public, to the private sector in terms of funding ops, and also recognition of the work they do...and elected officials.”

Changing perceptions was also discussed in relation to elected officials. It was suggested that elected officials need to look at their roles and perceive themselves as enablers of social action, though they may not see their roles in that way: “elected officials are enablers for social action- we haven’t talked about them a lot because we haven’t got stories to tell and that’s sad. That we don’t recognise that as part of their role is the main issue....the difference between sending something off for an officer to solve and bringing a member of the community with them to solve it. And it’s that shift in thinking.”

Improving collaboration

Some felt that more people need to be convinced of the benefits of social action: “we need to have trust that this idea of co-production, that social action is actually a good thing and that different conversations would also need to happen with elected officials as well.”

Greater flexibility in reporting is needed as well as building in trust in the commissioning process. It was suggested that what was needed was to remove rigid approaches to reporting outcomes: “holding people account for not necessarily delivering on their ten workshops, there’s a more nuanced way of doing things.” An example was given of how a voluntary sector representative meets monthly with their commissioner and trust was built: “they actually get a lot of value from that because the commissioner isn’t there to beat

them with a stick. They're there to understand how can they approach things in a different way and doing things better the next month."

A key strategy for improving collaboration was being more open to communicating with others: "there's a need for the voluntary sector to be collaborative as well and not create a fortress mentality and realise we need to work together." However, it was argued that the problems of competition have led to greater support for more co-production: "we're seeing a shift from more competitive to more collaborative approaches to commissioning and we feel that rather than try and create competition to force costs down a good outcome isn't necessarily a low cost it could be good service at the end of it."

Table 1: Participants' examples of social action strategies from Local Authorities

Local Authority	Example summary
LA1	Created a crowdfunding approach where council meets 50% of funding when initiative raises 25%. The final 25% can be raised by the initiative once it starts.
LA2	Adopted a similar crowdfunding approach to LA1 to support initiatives with initial funds
LA3	Utilised environment funding to use 'unadopted' roads to help start up projects
LA4	An umbrella organisation that was under threat of funding cuts overturned the decision by demonstrating a value for money assessment

CONCLUSIONS

Participants argued for a range of strategies for changing roles and relationships to improve social action in communities. Commissioners need flexibility, time and space for learning so as not to be 'bogged down' in their others tasks. They also need to challenge old ways of thinking, get excited and have "different conversations." It cannot be assumed that commissioners, elected officials or even voluntary sector representatives have the necessary skills to enable social action and the right support, information and training must be offered.

NEXT STEPS

The next stage of the action research programme involves working with six local partnerships on social action projects to co-produce solutions to issues faced by the communities.

Future events will continue to provide forums to share more examples of good practice and learn through our network. We are planning Peer Learning Network events for 2019 and 2020 but our third workshop in this series will be:

- “Making Stories Count: What and How should we be measuring impact?” (Leeds, 30 October 2018).

Both our initial report based on scoping discussions in April 2018 with commissioners and VCSE groups and our first workshop findings from our Birmingham event can be found online at: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/management/esa/research>

If there are themes and issues highlighted within either report which you feel need further investigation or you have relevant case study examples and reports which you would like to share, please contact the research team (contact details below).

You can also share your views and experiences and highlight any ongoing initiatives by engaging with us via twitter @Enabling_SA #socialactionnetwork #co-creatingchange

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