



Better Together VCS Policy Forum

Alliance Contracting: A Model for County Durham?

Report on a VCS led forum involving VCS organisations, public sector partners and commissioners held online via Microsoft Teams on Friday 16th October 2020

This Forum was convened to look at how plans for Alliance based commissioning are developing around Mental Health and Wellbeing. There was an opportunity for VCS providers to share insights with commissioners and discuss how we might move forward with the development of a VCS Alliance specifically for Mental Health and Wellbeing but also more widely for future commissioning intentions as they arise.

Introduction

The Forum was chaired by Jo Laverick, Executive Director of [Durham Community Action](#) and the VCS representative on the [County Durham Partnership](#) Board. Jo also chairs the bi-monthly meetings of the [Better Together VCS Forum](#).

Twenty people attended the Forum from a diverse range of both large and small voluntary sector organisations and public sector partners.

Jo provided some context setting: Partnership working is evolving, and the Covid-19 Pandemic has affected the way we all work. All agencies and VCS providers continued, with some exceptions, to work remotely to provide support and advice. There has been much learning through both positive and negative experiences. Advice In County Durham and the Better Together VCS Forum, together with the cross sector Resilient Communities Group have been key partnerships to gather and share intelligence and provide opportunities to reflect on what works best and what might be taken into the new world. The County Durham Partnership has been undertaking a governance review and following extensive consultation with stakeholders has developed a revised [County Durham Partnership structure](#).

Greater coordination of commissioning is underway with the appointment of a joint Head of Integrated Commissioning, and there is a desire to move towards more trust based commissioning and genuine co-production, where there are opportunities for collective responsibility for creating the conditions for people to achieve better outcomes. One of the key elements of collaborative commissioning currently being explored by the council with its partners is Alliance Contracting. Previous Better Together Forums have been kept apprised of developments and this Policy Forum provided an opportunity to focus on this subject and discuss opportunities for the sector to come together and explore what Alliance based

working could mean for the VCS and what options may be available for us to organise in a more structured way to collaborate and shape services and commissioning in the future.

Alliance Contracting: Where are we now? [link to presentation](#)

Tricia Reed, Strategic Commissioning Manager, Durham County Council

The presentation provided an overview of the reasons the council is moving to form a Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance; what the Alliance will coordinate and manage; the [community based mental health prevention outcomes](#) which have been proposed through consultation; the scope of the contract; and how the procurement will be carried out. There was an explanation that an Alliance is a way of working based on relationships, trust, and shared purpose, all guided by a set of agreed Alliance principles.

Tricia has provided a summary of the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance Q&A's](#) from Workshop Sessions held 2nd and 9th October 2020 together with a list of the [current contracts in scope](#)

The process is being supported by Linda Hutchinson, an independent consultant from [lh alliances](#), who can be contacted via email: info@lhalliances.org.uk

For further questions on the process contact the project manager, Amanda Russell, via email: amanda.russell@durham.gov.uk

A document [Alliance Commissioning and Coproduction in Mental Health](#) written by the National Development Team for Inclusion, had been previously circulated.

Preparing the VCS for Alliance working

Jo informed the Forum that DCA has a small resource which can potentially:

- a) Support an alliance of mental health care providers to contribute to the tendering process next year, and/or
- b) Enable the VCS to meet and develop an alliance, and a governance structure which supports the alliance. This would be a generic alliance which would come together to inform all public sector commissioning in the future - a longer term model to be determined by consultation and collaboration across the sector.

The resource which DCA can bring will allow them to develop a brief for external consultants to work with VCS providers in development of an Alliance, and a model which works for the organisations involved.

Carol Gaskarth informed the Forum that there is also a resource available to support Alliance based working through the Resilient Communities Group.

Carol also updated the Forum about the work and reshaping of the Resilient Communities Group; the development of a Resilience Hub responding to the mental health impact of

Covid-19; and the transformation of Mental Health delivery around serious mental illness and community care.

Further details can be obtained from Carol, as the chair of the Resilient Communities Group, by email: carol.gaskarth@pcp.uk.net

Facilitated Discussion

Participants were encouraged to consider three questions.

- What kinds of challenges do you think this way of working might have for your organisation?
- What would you like to get out of it that you don't already have, and what 's your "offer" in terms of services and resources?
- Can you commit leadership time to the development of this work?

It became clear that there is a need for more structured discussion to take place for those interested in pursuing this further.

Two areas of development were identified: a specific Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance and a more generic VCS Alliance to prepare to respond to future commissioning intentions.

It was suggested that learning from areas that had already embarked on alliance working would be useful (e.g. Plymouth & Glasgow) alongside an understanding of [Human Learning Systems](#) based on the initial work around Commissioning in Complexity by Toby Lowe.

Next Steps

- Circulation of this report to members of the Better Together Forum, Commissioners and other relevant partners.
- Short survey to be circulated to members of the Better Together Forum to ascertain who would like to be engaged with this development work
- Developing from the outcomes of the survey (returns anticipated in early November), DCA will draw up a short paper for those expressing an interest in pursuing alliance-based working. The paper will form a basis for setting out a developmental plan, which will address:
 - Summary of issues and opportunities for alliance-based working (based on sector feedback and commissioners "asks") and taking into account the context of working under Covid. This will be presented as an invitation for further discussion/insights from the sector.
 - Resources for supporting development work between VCS organisations (outline support available and timelines)
 - Suggested process and content for a developmental programme
 - An outline brief/specification for consultants (based on sector feedback) for comment and development.