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The contribution of the arts in whole system approaches

The short-term need to focus on statutory provision and those with the highest need in commissioning risks undermining the longer-term policy driver to shift resources to early intervention and prevention in a whole range of public service areas. Commissioning bodies are all grappling with this dilemma and seeking to getting ahead of the curve by rolling out whole system approaches, taking in wider geographic areas across local authority areas, and going deeper into communities to tap existing assets and resources across all types of community providers and groups. Everyone wants to be person and asset-focused.

Shifting away from grant-funding with loose output-based measures to outcomes-based frameworks has been a big step for both providers and commissioners. As commissioning evolves, ensuring this focus on outcomes and social value is harnessed across all partners in a genuinely collaborative way is resource-intensive and requires real ownership of the outcomes by all partners. Co-design and co-production principles are also a vital ingredient. Lots of commissioners are using smaller organisations to prototype changes through community-based commissioning at a local level. Arts and culture organisations are a vital element in these evolving collaborative systems.

In December 2014, the London Borough of Southwark established a ground-breaking Early Action Commission, in partnership with NEF, chaired by Rt. Hon. Margaret Hodge MP, through its health and wellbeing board, which seeks to shift thinking radically in this direction. Round the corner in Lambeth, Adrian Smith, director of neighbourhood strategy and commissioning, thinks arts and culture providers have come a long way but doesn’t underestimate the challenge for all voluntary sector providers. For the first time he is seeing providers develop social impact evidence which will help him as a commissioner.

Adrian reflects that "You get innovation by being open to collaboration and the user voice in design which has driven innovation for us. Similarly this had to be reflected in the investment we put in as a Co-operative Council which was about creating mind-sets open to collaboration. If you haven’t got that cultural fit, innovation won’t happen."

Adrian cites one local example: 198 Contemporary Arts was commissioned through a range of structures, including use of capital and revenue. Adrian says it’s crucial that the reach, impact and innovative skills which arts and culture providers demonstrate aren’t lost in a new generation of commissioning.
"Support mechanisms required for person-centred approaches to service provision require providers to understand what life is really like from morning to night for service users. Some voluntary organisations are uniquely placed to engage in these approaches. Engaging with commissioners can provide real opportunities for our arts and culture organisations to map what they are doing against these programmes and be involved in future commissioning cycles.

"In the future for example, a big space is going to be around new community health models. Our really small third sector groups could play a key role in helping to achieve some of the simple things that help people to be independent and resilient in their own homes in the community. That might include small programmes where people are reminded to take their prescribed medicine which can help them recover, stay well and be independent."

Andrew Holden,
Activist Group