

The facilitator's perspective – Linda Hutchinson

Having spent 18 months promoting alliance contracting as a mature way to commissioning services it was a great experience to turn the talk into reality. I met Nick Dixon, Commissioning Manager at Stockport Council, last summer through some work related to co-production. It was not until the autumn that I told him about alliance contracting and he 'got it' immediately. He had anyway been planning to unite the two separate services of Recovery and Enablement and this worked for him as a vehicle to do that.

As the budget was very limited I had to work around two workshops only. Nick and I had a regular weekly phone call and kept in touch in by email but the face to face time with all the parties was constrained.

Our other constraint was that the outcomes for the contract were being developed in parallel. A set of outcomes for all mental health services were being co-produced with people who use services, carers, frontline staff, providers and commissioners. Because of the timing of this, we did not have the full set available at the outset.

Before the first workshop I spent some time on the phone to my colleagues in Australia and New Zealand. Between them they have facilitated hundreds of alliance and relational contracts. I was keen to be as true to the process as possible while acknowledging the need to adapt for health and social care services and the limited contact time.

The breakthrough moment seemed to me to come early in the second workshop. After the first workshop, it did not seem like we had made much progress which was in part because we were trying to do too much from a blank sheet of paper, by consensus. For the second workshop, I asked Nick to define his vision for the Enablement and Recovery service and we started with this. He was thoughtful and inspiring, as always; a great motivator. We then did a couple of exercises which were aimed at understanding the value of coming together and being explicit about any fears or concerns. After that, it felt as if people were up and running and my role became one of harnessing the collaborative energy, not having to stimulate it - a great feeling.

I would have liked to have been able to be more closely involved in setting up the governance teams as the right governance implemented in the right way is such a key part of making an alliance work. I advised on this from a distance and Nick and I talked through several times. The actual contract development was led by Mike Halsall, legal adviser to Stockport Council. I had supplied him with some examples from other sectors but these were either about construction or infrastructure or were health related but strategic rather than operational. He did a fantastic job at stripping out the unnecessary parts and working up what was needed. We batted ideas, suggestions and comments between us over the weeks and, despite the tight timetable, it will be in place soon.

The first year of the contract will not have any risk sharing elements. These will be worked up to start in the second year. But I am sure that the benefits of sharing expertise and resources and working across organisations will make a difference anyway.

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