



Alliance Contracting – Providers Perspective

I have worked in the social care field in Stockport for many years working with both adults and young people who experience a range of mental health difficulties. The majority of my time has been spent with a small voluntary sector organisation 'SPARC' (Stockport Progress And Recovery Centre) formally known as Stockport Day Centre. I started my time at the centre as a student and then carried on as a volunteer working both at the centre and also in the community developing a young person's mental health project. I was then fortunate to be employed as a support work at SPARC then as Deputy Manager and I have been the Manager at the project for approx 10 years.

Throughout all this time I have seen and played an active part of the many changes and adaptations within the organisation responding to local and national initiatives and changes in policy. The past 2 years has been particularly challenging with the introduction of personalisation together with the emphasis on social enterprise. SPARC along with other organisations have weathered the storms and we have been developing new business models in order to continue and grow whilst other similar centres in other areas have withered and some have disappeared altogether. The local mental health commissioner has been an instrumental part of this survival and this partnership has recently been strengthened by the principles of Coproduction spreading throughout all mental health services in the Stockport borough.

When the commissioner introduced the concept of 'Alliance Contracting' with the council working with SPARC and Stockport & District Mind and in order to create a Reablement and Recovery Service in Stockport I have to admit I greeted it with trepidation and suspicion. As an organisation we had been developing and responding to recent changes without any reassurance that our endeavours were going to result in a positive outcome for both the organisation and our customers. Whilst there is and always has been links between the 2 charities these have not been strong and we work in different ways with different client groups. However both organisations could see the benefits of working together and workshops were arranged so that we could begin the process.

The workshops were attended by key people from the local authority and key staff and management committee members from both organisations. The 2 workshops were definitely a game of 2 halves as the first half was difficult and no goals were scored ending in frustration and confusion. However the 2nd workshop was much more productive we had had time to consolidate our thinking and refocus and we were all able to see the benefits and plan an alternative future.

Since that time a lot of work has been completed in order to create the framework of this new service. The infrastructure of both organisations has been adapted and the contract

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for the Alliance has been drawn up with the involvement of all 3 partners and is due to be signed in the very near future. Communication with service users and other stakeholders has begun and it is our aim to be ready at the beginning of May. We now need to be prepared to learn and adapt to the future outcomes of our new service whilst also maintaining the identity and ethos of each organisation and ensuring continuity and consistency for our service users.

In terms of learning from the process of getting this Alliance up and running I think that it would have been more helpful to increase the involvement of the Management Committee Members of both charities much more throughout these early days. In addition and more importantly I feel that in the desire to quickly meet the challenges then we have not included our service users in the process as much as we should. We now have quite a bit of catching up to do to engage people in sharing the vision however given the power of our aspirations to provide a seamless service that supports individuals to build and develop their own aspirations then this should be an easy task and one I look forward to implementing.

I am now much more confident and reassured by the Alliance and look forward to the future challenges. There is a great deal of enthusiasm within our 2 teams and we have already started to share resources to the benefit of all. The experience for our volunteers and students will be much richer with new opportunities provided for them in both organisations. The role of the representatives from the local authority has been key and the sharing of resources and expertise from all 3 organisations has created a firm foundation on which to build. I look forward to reporting on future outcomes of the service and of the benefits and changes that will take place. To summarise the 'Alliance' means that we really are in it together and that we build on our strengths and weaknesses together learning as go.

Lynn Barrett
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