

The Commissioner Perspective – Nick Dixon

I had been working with partners and colleagues for around 10 years in Stockport, endeavouring to create a more person centred and recovery oriented mental health service, prior to engaging with Linda Hutchinson and her colleague Georgina Craig in 2012-13. Alliance Contracting, when explained to me, seemed a very logical extension to this direction of travel.

Recognising the limitations of traditional commissioning (primarily focussed on price over quality), and believing in collaboration as a modus operandi rather than confrontation, unconstructive challenge and defensive practice within commissioning and providing, I recognised the opportunity presented by coproduction.

I had already involved people using services and carers in commissioning processes and decision making, I had helped bring about Stockport's first explicitly recovery oriented service and had helped establish personalisation as a core policy and self directed support as a core offer within mental health provision. When NESTA selected Stockport as a People Powered health site, it gave strength to the approach and named the principles underpinning it as 'Coproduction'. NESTA brought our work credibility and linked us into experts who could help us forge forward. This was such an exciting time as we pulled a strong and cohesive partnership team together to work towards this common agenda of coproduction.

Faced with the need to commission a service which would offer both reablement and recovery, linking and supporting our customers on a journey from the acute clinical services through to the communities in which they live (but from whom they were all too often excluded and marginalised), I recognised the risk to two small voluntary organisations. Going to the market would risk each player losing their place in the provider market in Stockport. Were this to happen, many years of local knowledge and experience could be lost, generating distress amongst people grown accustomed to the support on offer from them.

The meeting with Linda came at an excellent time to provide an answer. The introduction of Alliance Contracting enabled me to protect both organisations, provided they would work to create an alliance with whom I could contract. Lynn Barrett and Les Crabb stepped up to the mark from SPARC and Stockport Mind.

Although there was some scepticism and concern expressed around the risks involved in innovating, and questioning of the motivation behind this new approach surely driven by saving money (untrue in the sense that the contract value was protected but certainly true if this were seen as part of a longer term strategy to reduce demand on services and hence to free up capacity and resource), all the players key to its success came together determined to make it work.

The result as it stands on April 2nd is so encouraging, with the contract written by Mike and Chris our legal and contract advisors and now in place and the detail of the alliance being further developed daily by the Alliance Leadership and Management teams.

As we seek to embed 'Collaboration' within the DNA of Stockport, to coin a phrase from Lambeth colleagues, a maturity of approach and manner and a willingness to take some risks is required; collaboration is very different in my eyes to partnership, captured I think with the idea of aligning your organisation's future success or failure with that of former competitive partners. It is certainly

asking those providers to step outside of their comfort zone and it pleases me greatly that to date those two organisations have risen to the challenge.

Nick Dixon

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