A local framework for voluntary and community sector engagement in commissioning

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Understanding need

Any commissioning process should start with a thorough understanding of the needs it is seeking to address. This may be through processes such as the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, the current means through which the health and wellbeing needs of local people are identified and addressed.

Voluntary organisations can help to get it right by:
- shaping the approach to needs assessments
- contributing data and intelligence
- making the views of service users known

Planning

This stage is about designing services to achieve the desired impact and identifying how progress will be measured.

Voluntary organisations can help to get it right by:
- suggesting local solutions to local problems
- providing evidence of what works on the ground
- advising on appropriate targets, outputs and outcomes

Monitoring and evaluating

In addition to monitoring delivery against the contract or other agreement, it is important to ensure that services remain appropriate to changing need. This can be tested by consulting a range of relevant parties during the review process.

Voluntary organisations can help by:
- highlighting successes and/or weaknesses in meeting client need
- identifying ways in which improvements can be made
- offering a route for consultation with service users

Purchasing and delivering

A service may be purchased, either by contracting (which may involve putting it out to tender) or through a grant. Grants are particularly appropriate as a way of securing community-based services or testing new approaches.

Voluntary organisations can help by:
- supporting decision-making processes for the award of contracts and grants
- delivering services under contract or grant agreement
- adding value to commissions by attracting additional resources to Middlesbrough

Commissioning appropriate and cost-effective services is a key challenge facing Middlesbrough Council. This framework is the result of a collaboration between Middlesbrough Council and Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA) to explore how appropriate voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement can support intelligent and effective commissioning.

We define commissioning as the cycle of assessing needs, designing responses and then achieving appropriate outcomes.

Commissioning is often confused with procurement, the stage of the commissioning cycle that involves purchasing. Commissioning may lead to the award of a contract, but it is important to note that grants can be an effective alternative to contracting.

Middlesbrough's voluntary and community sector

There are over 600 voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) in Middlesbrough. They include grassroots community organisations, community centres and sports clubs, local and national charities, social enterprises and mutual organisations. Details of many of these organisations can be found on Sector Connector, the on-line directory accessible through www.mvda.info.

The role of local support and development organisations (LSDOs)

LSDOs, such as MVDA, can support effective commissioning by:
- engaging appropriate VCOs (and through them seeking the views of service users)
- building the capacity of VCOs to manage grants and contracts
- managing grants funds to effect a range of community based provision
- supporting the development of and/or leading partnerships and consortia

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