

Challenges of public service delivery and impact on public and VCS organisations: Evidence from research (summary)

Trust and closeness to users

The voluntary sector often claims to be closer than statutory or private sector providers to service users, and so in an ideal position to find ways to improve public services. People especially from excluded groups trust the VCS because it is NOT the statutory sector. Trust raises important issues of relationships with clients and about the care of personal information. Reporting requirements of statutory agencies need to be able to respect the nature of the client /VCS relationship. More work needs to be done on getting this relationship right.

Performance and value

How VCS organisations articulate and demonstrate their value is an evolving area. Voluntary sector performance can be hard to define, much less measure. VCS organisations typically work across public sector service boundaries, which means that they are subject to a number of regulatory regimes, with different approaches to performance management and reporting. A 'public value' framework emphasises outcomes, wider collective objectives, and reduced reliance on performance targets.

Skills

Skill sets associated with procurement are thought to be weak in the VCS, and statutory organisations sometimes lack strategic, managerial and business skills to work successfully with the VCS. From the perspective of commissioners there is a need for training to achieve compliance with externally defined standards. VCS skills are being tackled from within the sector and through government programmes such as futurebuilders and the change-up agenda.

On-line capacity

Significant portions of the VCS are 'electronically challenged', lacking the capacity and not seeing the requirement to work with on-line information. With growing use of information and transaction services as part of planning, delivery and evaluation processes they are at increasing risk of being disenfranchised and excluded

The VCS workforce

More is expected of the VCS workforce (paid staff and volunteers). Workloads, responsibilities and skills required of volunteers increased with contracting in the 1990s - particularly in leadership roles. There is evidence that volunteering is becoming more like work. Change can be distressing and disempowering for some volunteers who find that increased focus on professional competency devalues their contribution. For paid workers concerns have been expressed about employment security, pay and conditions, work intensification and the possible loss of commitment. Little research evidence exists on the VCS paid workforce.

Gaps between Large and small VCS organisations

Public sector commissioning tends to be taken up by larger, better resourced organisations. A growing funding gap between large and small VCOs has been documented. Yet it is often the services and expertise of small VCS organisations that public agencies want to capture. There is fear that the role of non-service providers will be neglected and that only those organisations and groups that directly improve the outcomes of government policy will be supported. Some substance behind this concern has been demonstrated by research in Scotland which reports that the voluntary sector there is becoming two sectors - one 'truly' voluntary and the other linked to government and business.

Collaboration

Successful models of collaborative working include one to one partnerships, clusters, consortia and sub contractual arrangements. Issues of 'territorialism' have to be challenged but the greatest barrier to success is not lack of will but lack of time to develop collaborations, especially for smaller organisations.