IP6, Executive director of social enterprise (ex-chief executive, senior officer)(M)

Speaker Key:

CM Interviewer

IE Interviewee

CM What’s your job role and experience with commissioning for social value?

IE I think there is two beats to the answer. So the vast majority of my experience have been working with local government where I was chief executive in both S and B and b, between 2006 and 2017 so most of my experience have been in working with local government as a senior officer. Since late last summer I have a new job working for a very small consultancy, whose business is basically working with public services, particularly local government, but not just local government and helping them. I think basically will describe it, helping them making social change happened in that place by working in partnerships. So you could say that C (name of the company), is actually commissioned to help create social value in organisations and community. Very interesting, I've been a commissioner all my life but I started just in the last 6-7 months, actually being the commissioned ... and I kind of started seeing this from the other side of the table.

CM Based on your overall experience, how do you articulate and define social value?

IE Yes, ok, so if I put my kind of local authority hat back on, I think fundamentally what we, and you have to also remember that (mmm….I have to). When I was in B (name of the city) I was working for labour council and when I was in S (name of the city) I was working for a more conservative authority, so there is some differences here. But, first and foremost, the local authorities I worked for, were looking for, and what I thought they were trying to achieve was to ensure that the way how the public pound gets spend has a positive impact on everybody in terms of improving lives. Now that’s a very kind of general statement to begin, to narrow it down, but this was about make sure that actually, the money we had, genuinely was bringing public good, so, all of the public. So that is kind of the first point that I wanted to make, everything that the local authority commission can we think of it in term, not just in the narrow focus of the commissioning might have, actually what general about it that might also follow on for the community as a whole. If I begin to kind of narrow that down, so, in local authorities like B (city), what they were trying to ensure was, for example, it is a big contract agency to be let, let’s say, around the provision of domiciliary care, in social care, yea, to help the people to live independently in their own home. So what were we will looking for is to ensure that the employment of people, who will then do that work, would come from people that lives in the community of the city. So, ehm, I’m thinking that’s a really good example, because B city council was one, where it had set for himself, all procurements, of its all possible, we need to be looking to see how we can develop the educational opportunities or the skills opportunities, or the employment opportunities for people in B, for spending that money. So, for me again is, back to that general principal of how the council think, over have this question of its expenditure, or has genuinely been able to commission with the money has, can make sure that money doesn’t just benefit the direct recipients of it, you know, the clients or the citizens, but more generally the communities that support individual to thrive and be independent as well. So, that’s how we looked at it. Interestingly enough in S (name of the city), which was a conservative authority, it had a similar approach, in the sense what all of its money to…work hard for the communities and so, therefore, to work out how to make sure that commissioning included in it conditions that was enable local people potentially to benefits, both in delivering and well in receiving services. I guess the difference in S (name of the city), between B of S was that (ehm) I kind of one numberless of wanted to create independency, you know, I think that was the big difference, I think in B. there were such concerns that the council being seen as the agent of commissioning and delivering services and potentially direct in that (…); in S was both concern about people, creating dependency though council funding of services, ehh, especially with reducing resources. I hope that makes sense.

CM Those cases involved also the citizens in shaping services to commission?

IE Yes indeed, interestingly enough, I think S was one of best than B. in this respect, so quite often commissioners don’t give enough thought to asking either citizens or existing providers how things could be done better. And I think that S. was better than B. for that; B. could be quite old fashioned and can be very municipal, leaving the feel that he knows best and therefore its intents and purposes commission just for its own prospective, while S. was really plain commitments to involving citizens in shaping what needed to be commissioned and potentially being of the solution as well, so being part of the delivery solutions. So…either way, there is still recognition to be important (…) you cannot commission anything if you don’t really understand what the market needs. So, it is crucial, as involving VSOs and from perspective, actually, of the private sector as well. You have to take quite a broad view at the early stages of the commissioning process, who would have really useful insights and information that you can use.

CM What role plays stakeholder engagement in this context?

IE Is essential in my view. I think that have been history in local government of committing being seen as something that the council does to other people and what the legislation has done was make people have to think much more than they used to, about the importance of stakeholder engagement, and particular that of citizens, asking them to get involved in the co-production of thinking as well delivering modules of delivery itself.

CM Do you refer to the SVA when talking about the legislation?

IE Yes, I think is giving an impetus to greater stakeholder engagements. But I think is also giving, is not just about stakeholder engagement. It’s given a greater impetus to understanding that you not just engaging in consulting with potential beneficiaries and services; you need to engage the wider set of people in case they made themselves to be part of the delivery mechanism. So is about trying to get public money to benefit the local people who is intended for, in terms of employment (Gap…so that) So, ya, so, in B. for example, the commissioning service in the city council has a charter for social responsibility and what that charter means is that above a certain thresholds, and I think is 50 thousand pounds, every tender that goes out will require the successful bidder to invest in employing local people and also to improving their skills.

CM To what extend the VSOs are engaged in this process?

IE Well, is a good question, I think it varies highly; I think that, often, VCSE just get seeing as potential providers and don’t really get involved at the formative stage, of thinking exactly, what it is you want to change for the better. I forgotten, there is still kind of quite hierarchical relationships between the council and VCSE sector, kind of seeing them as the ‘end solution to delivery’, rather than helping with design services upfront.

CM Do you mean, they are not much involved in the co-design?

IE Not enough, insufficient, I think is highly variable and, but even so, I still think that often there are insufficiently involved.

CM Could you give any example of successful project where the VSOs have been engaged successfully?

IE Well, I seen a number of things over the years I guess, where working really closely, particularly actually with Community and Voluntary Service kind of infrastructure organizations. I had some very good work, in that. Interestingly enough, particularly, in children and adult social care, where they have helped immensely with the council understanding how to design, for example services for young people leaving care. Some years ago, I saw in S., a really good piece of work where those agencies offer a (..), a number of charities actually, who working with the young people transitioning from care into independent leavening. We used an organization, actually called S., to support services for people at risk of homelessness to design the transition from leaving foster care to independent leaving for a young person. And that was a recognition that actually, because other organizations had a much better understanding of the needed care and the sort of issues that you will have to deal with. And we handed over the design of the new service, more or less, as I said, to a small number of local charities who actually are already working with those young people.

CM What are the main top barriers in engaging VSOs in the commissioning projects embedding social value?

IE The main issues? Eh, do you know, I tend to think that local government officers, in a sense, they all they know best at times, that they got lot of experience of commissioning and therefore, in a sense, they should be in control of it all. That’s what I think. So, for me is almost a cultural issue. For such a long time the local government had so many responsibilities for delivering services to communities, that, to some extent, they could develop ehm …they could become a little arrogant about what they are doing and tend do not ask people about their views.

But I think that VCSE are often very frustrated with local government because doesn’t ask them nothing about their experiences; and yes, I found that all of the time, actually in B., to be honest with you, where particularly the infrastructure organizations supporting the voluntary and community sector was always saying if ‘only the city council would ask us upstream about some of the things that was going to be recommissioned, we can give them really good advice, and make sure that the commissioning was much better. But the council officers cannot, just they think they know best.

It is, I think that’s a way for looking at it. Yes, basically because the money comes in through local government and then goes out to the commissioning process, it is about keeping control, isn’t? So that is also all about the accountability. So, if you are spending public money, you also want to be clear that you understand how this is going to be spend and the difference which is intended to make. Ehm, but, I think it goes beyond that, sometimes it is just about we know best, and you get that old fashioned commissioner provider relationships, don’t you, where the commissioner sets everything and the providers is expected to responds to it rather than the providers shaping ultimately what’s required. So I think it is a power relationship, yes.

CM Does SVA encouraged a favourable environment for the VSOs to undertake commissioning projects?

IE I think overall, it has been a positive influence. I think, it created a clearer expectation of how commissioning could be improved and what really will do the commissioning would look like. I think, unfortunately, it’s been set against, nearly a decade also, of revenue reduction to local authorities, ehm and, so on the one hand you hope that the Act would have opened the things out, make the commissioning a more inclusive activity, but as the money was reduced, do you know actually I think the local authority have almost kind of reasserted their control and power at time, because they were even more worried about how to spend less and less money wisely. So I think, has been two conflicting forces. So, I think that the SV Act has set so made clear expectations on how things much be better but in the same time, local authorities were more inward looking (..?) as they have to save more money.

CM What’s your opinion about the wider changing relationship between the local council and VSOs? What is the impact on the commissioning for social value?

IE So, I think there is a much better understanding now, between the VSOs and the state, about collaboration and how to improve the commissioning cycle so that there is much better stakeholders’ engagements throughout the commissioning process. So I think that has been an improvement in that. So I think in any council works much better with the voluntary and community infrastructure organizations than they used to. I also know that the things, in some places they got very fractious, because as money reduces, being considerable disinvestment from the voluntary and community sector and also, at the same time, there is an increasing reliance placed on it to do much, much more with less money. This makes the relationships quite difficult. So again it is a bit like previous points, I think has been definitely some positives about better joined working, but at the same time, there is also, the austerity have affected local government more and more. I think, and therefore, has been disinvestment from services that voluntary and community sector have run. This made the relationships quite difficult.

CM What’s your opinion in terms of partnerships and collaboration?

IE So, again it varies from local council area to another, it is not a straightforward picture in it. But again if I just reflect on things in B. (city), so I think that lots, so what the B. voluntary and community sector organizations will probably say to you is that the council is not sufficiently open about explaining all the challenges it faces and all the different ways it might need to save money. And therefore, when it comes to VSOs it doesn’t really have an open and honest conversation about why have been a disinvestment for those services, and therefore kind of pick, an insufficient trust established in that kind of context. I think, that’s the way I have experienced it. So I think there is a lack (…) so I don’t think there is a genuine partnership, I still think many councils sees themselves as the commissioners and consider themselves separate from those people that considered them as providers of services. I mean there is kind of conflict in letting people in at the design stage. I probably at this stage is about your point, just some of the issues is about keeping control.

CM How the commissioning is working in practice? How are engaged the VSOs?

IE So, I think you can probably. Well, there are lots of definitions of commissioning out there, but I think numberless, you can broadly break it down into four stages. So for me, and I will indicate where I think for me the VSOs are involved and where I don’t think are involved. So, the kind of beginning of any commissioning process is absolutely the one looking at the need that you are trying to address and then identifying priorities also within that broad area of need. So, there very early stage of the commissioning cycle is ought to be a sort of strategic needs assessment and then prioritisation within that, of the things you really need to tackle most. Ehm, I don’t often see voluntary and community sector organizations get involved headily at that stage, if I’m honest. Local authorities will tend to run that part (…?) because… and very often will be the public health functions of local authorities that will take control of that process as well, genuinely because they had the experience and the expertise in sort of strategic need analysis. So quite often if feels to me that is a fairly prescriptive process that’s owned by councils. They may overall draw on a range of data and analytics from other organizations but they will genuinely manage the process by themselves. And the politicians of course will make decisions about what is considered to be the priorities anyway, so is always there that added complexities that however good and needs analysis you do, then will them be political decisions taken about it, which can cut across any consultation or engagement you might have done.

CM Are VSOs engaged to define social value charters in local council or the priorities are set at the top level?

IE It was certainly, in those cases, been set by the local authority, but again that be various between areas. Some councils would have consulted with voluntary and community sector organizations about charters and similar approaches but I think ultimately, how I was saying to you, still seems to me that the local authority will ultimately decide what’s what. There is just variable kind of consultation. So, if I can go back to the previous picture, so I think at the strategic level of doing the needs analysis often local authority will lead that work. There will be some consultation or engagement but ultimately the politicians still decides, which things they want to prioritise if I’m honest with you. The next stage, which will then be – so you got your priorities, what kind of service design is required to deliver on those projects, so would be much more engagement- not just voluntary and community organizations but the community as well, there will be a consultation process that help to shape the actual design of the services that are needed. And I feel that bit of the process works reasonably well, but some local authorities can be suspicious of existing providers and would be worried if they are involved in that stage of the process, essentially they might be getting the hands up about winning future business. So, sometimes that can also be quite intense with the people engagement as will be worries about of best of interests, complex of interests in there. Ehm, ya, so, in some council sometimes they don’t allow existing providers to take part in the kind of co-design stage, as they worried that they might take hands (..) for winning future business. You don’t get to the actual kind of procurement stage, which is literally going to market and buying. I mean obviously that’s a defined process and there might be some sort of market testing in advance of that, but basically there is a fairly straightforward process of people bidding for work, being sure this is for it, winning it and all of that. So that’s definitely an outlined process that the council will run as people has to form a bid for work. And then the last stage for me really, is when somebody won the bid and the delivering, and whatever they been asked to deliver, there’s been evaluation staff. Ya, the most important bit from commissioning to me is actually looking at whether the services commissioned are making a difference. And I often think that’s where tensions (…) back in. So I think councils are very bad at designing evaluation frameworks for the impact of what they commissioned. And also the providers know much, much better about the good ways things should be measured and reported. Ehm, but because there is this suspicion again that providers would want to look at what they are doing as well very possibly could be doing, I think councils try to take control of that stage, and they are very prescriptive about what they require from providers about performance. So, then obviously you get the matter – have you made any difference, how the needs changed, do you need to amend your priorities, and all things starts all over again. So I think what I’m describing is that there are at least a couple of points in the commissioning cycle, so the priority is - needs identification, prioritisation being the first and then third point, when you go to market, the council just lead on basically and (..) and they tend to be a bit better about designing services but suspicious about people who are already providers and then could be a lot of tensions when you are doing an evaluation work around performance and impacts and whatever, because I think, you know, when money is involved, councils wants to keep control of the performance frameworks, even if the providers might have actually better ways of measuring impact.

CM How the prescriptive regulations of commissioning influences small voluntary organizations?

IE I think as money got tighter the council tend to make it harder for smaller organizations to bid, not always with deliberation, but bidding for a contract with the council could be quite a resource intensive activity. The smaller community organizations sometimes literally just don’t have the resources to do that. Ehm, I think one of the challenges is actually around procurement is that, is a very labour intensive process and you know, it can take lots of time as well efforts obviously to put a bid together and small organizations just don’t have that time.

CM Some VSOs involved in the pre-commissioning phase of designing the service of the commissioning process, when they bid in the procurement, are not winning the contracts…

IE Absolutely, I’m not surprised that you found that, I guess I was trying to describe some of that, so when I was talking about designing services… So, once you done your needs assessment and have done your priorities, so you are going to what services do we think we need in order to meet those needs, ya, that will often will be a co-design process, but councils can be very suspicious in involving existing providers because they think they might give them an advantage in involving them in designing the next stage, or as you described, sometimes if you get involved in that stage, and you are presently delivering services for that council, the council then might find ways to exclude you because it will say you have inside information … that’s right, and, I’m not surprise you found that. I think it’s been a suspicion on council part to justify, they are just worried people are guessing to have competitive advantage when they really should be thinking about is – how we can draw on all the expertise we have got, to have the best design services and I don’t believe that should impact on the procurement stage at all, but some council think that it will do.

It is not easy but I think, for me this is back to people do not necessarily understanding well enough how procurement works. You have to ask the citizens what she or him wants because its, you know, their life experience it is really invaluable in co-design but you have also to ask people which have experience in providing services and to tell you how they found it as well, because, you know, often things get commissioned that do not quite work well enough and providers can give you really a good understanding of what mistakes have been made in the past. And as long you are really clear that you are not actually giving away or intending to give away the details of the procurement process, that’s fine. But I just think councils get, they are risk adverse, they are really, really worried about things taken to judicious review so (..?) competitiveness. So, sometimes, as you observed, they are just tick the people that could not take part in the co-design and then be a bidder. And I just think that’s a lack of appetite for risk, frankly.

I had many conversations with the voluntary and community organizations, especially the smaller ones. I said them that the very best thing you can do when you are noting competitive procurements, is actually to operate like a federation, so as an organization so that you can speak collectively and you can contribute collectively and potentially actually you might even bid collectively so that you can call your resources across a number of organizations in order to be able to win work jointly. So, I think that, while I'm critical about some local authorities think and operates, truthfully I think that the voluntary and community organizations needs to understand perhaps that is hard for council to engage with 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 organizations. They need to organize themselves pretty well.

CM Are VSOs inclined to collaborate among themselves?

IE They are worried to collaborate that they might lose business to each other. But it seems to me that if they want to make sure that the have the very best specification for a future service then they will do well with work with one another on that rather then, you know, there is lots of independent organizations that the council just can't consider individually all the time.

CM Could you give more details about your organization and the commissioning projects that you are working with?

IE Ehm, actually, I don’t think you are wrong. I think the organization I'm now working for, has two particular views that is trying to promote and we are working in a number of places around the country that are interested in both these views. So the first it is, we are called C for a very particular reason, and that’s is we would see that the preconditions for having really effective strategies to improve people’s lives are they actually the leadership of the place, either that might be NHS, local government, police, community leaders, politicians- the leadership itself should be based on strong relationships and aligned set of values and signed up to a set of priorities that are related to the institutions values (...) but are genuine priorities that that leadership agrees or writes for the place? I feel that your organization proposes a new way of doing e. So the first thing about the C work is trying to make sure that relationships links to strong partnerships which themselves are founded on shared values and a very clear set of priorities that are not linked to individual institutions. And therefore we try to avoid, what often happens which is the people put their institution before the place and the things that their organizations requires comes first.

So, that’s the first area we do working, helping places to make that making that executive to link to the leaders of place, leaders of system; we take leaders from different part of the pace to actually work one another, and understand that their job is not actually to tell one another what to do but actually to work out how to collaborate together. So this is the first bit. The second bit is specifically about commissioning. So, we think that what is the fundamental flows in the present system is that we start commissioning from the perspective of a needs assessment of the place and prioritising the needs, which we need to do, don’t get me wrong, we said that's very, very important work. But actually, one of the challenges you find is that money is also ultimately controlled by the funder, and what we do on this is council understand all the money is coming into the place helps to align the funders. If the council commissioning piece of work, doesn’t matter what it is, let’s say social care, is likely that there will be other organizations also financing work in social care but they will working to a different accountability framework, they will be working with a different set of matrix, and therefore we think that the commissioners needs to take a step back, and all those people who are potentially poling money in the service, need to sit down to one another first and say – what are they doing, what are their programs – so to take a step back from that and see if you can pull all that resource to then be able to invest in the overall priorities the community needs rather than the ones each individual institution has decided upon. So really good example for me is been Big Lottery, where lots of money – for example is financing a program called, Fulfilling Lives. The Fulfilling Lives is a programs designed to help people with multiple complex needs- usually around homelessness, substance abuse, alcoholic, ya, Ehm, they will put money into a community and they will have a certain amount that they will require, they will have a performance framework that they use and they will drive that agenda. But in the same time, the NHS, the local authority, the police service and others will also be doing work with the same peoples, but with different frameworks. So what we are kind of saying is that it is much a bigger piece in commissioning, which is to take a step back and say how do you actually align and integrate those frameworks and so you will not potentially invest in similar ways but that are not sufficiently aligned to make the maximum impact if the money is genuinely joined up. So we call that commissioning with complexities and what we mean by that is that complex (?) going into local areas and is no longer good enough for each of the institution or funders to have their own priorities, to have their own frameworks etc, those things needs to be much better to join otherwise you just suffer from a set of initiatives that are complementary and don’t last.

CM So, as I'm understanding, you are trying to support them to align the framework and common priorities, with a linear investment and linear modes of evaluating outcomes of the project?

IE Yes, absolutely yes, is a bit like...yes, I was about of giving you some examples ...We are doing some works in both N (city name) and I (city name). Actually, both have the BL funding for the Fulfilling lives program and, essentially, what we doing is involving Big Lottery in a set of discussions with the council, SSG and other commissioners to say – can you integrate your priorities, can you integrate your delivery frameworks so that everybody is pooling in the same direction at the same time, and you potentially choose, a horrible expression, a bigger....

CM Are involved also VSOs in these projects?

IE Yes, well, so, Big Lottery funding has transposed this money to a VSO, so absolutely voluntary and community sector is involved in this as well.

CM Does these projects links to social value?

IE Very much so, so I work around, so the first bit I said, was talking about our approach around collaboration (…) We offer people talk about bringing the local leadership together, so that the local council align with, civic executive, hospital, and all of that, we say that’s true but there is local leadership everywhere and particularly the voluntary and community sector and particularly in local communities. So what we do is help joint all of that up and help people to develop the kind of relationship in order to have a common approach to what they have to do.

CM There are any ongoing projects?

IE There is two places in particular, we have, what we call – social investment from an organization called L..., so, in this (?) organization that makes money available including to collaborate with the citizens to do research and development. So we working in D. and B. and in G. to explore further with L. how we create that vitality of local leadership, so the people can genuinely say this are the issues in my place and you can genuinely end up with strategies are rooted within its need as supposed with the institutional bodies may need. So, yes, we have a massive five year program with research involved in those two places.

CM Thank you very much.