IP12, Senior public services researcher(M)

Speaker Key:

CM Interviewer

IE Interviewee

CM What is your job role and experience with the commissioning for social value?

IE Yes sure, so just in terms of my job role, I’m a senior researcher. I joined at an interesting time so it was, I believe it was towards the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011 at a time that the coalition government obviously had come into power, they introduced austerity you know, the context was all how we can address the deficit and public services and local services in particular, you know, experience over the next five years and still continue to experience very significant cuts to the expenditures. So a lots of them…I think austerity is interesting because it’s …to an extent, forced some public leaders to think differently about the type of services that they deliver but at the same time because it’s being so disruptive, it reduced the capacity for council and other public organizations to actually do things differently. So initially, some excited people were healing it as something that can potentially transform the public sector in the UK. But generally, what you see is, you see some innovation but, by and large, you see an entrenchment of public services. So, you know, local authorities and other organizations have tended to try to deal with austerity by reducing the eligibility criteria for accessing services and through, you know, I would say, though salami slices rather than actually transforming what they do. And I think that it’s because the scale of the cuts completely removed the capacity they need to actually transform services, into actually, fundamentally, do things differently. So, the other things it has had a positive effect in anyway I don’t think it is really helped organizations to do things differently. You know, as part of that package of reforms that encouraging the government introduced, you know, there is more a focus on, although this, I think is more a revolution because you saw some early thinking from labour party, you know, on how to great greater social value from commissioning for public services and so on, but the Social Value Act, you know, was sort of (…..) it law, so, the austerity was among couple things that Coalition Government was interested, one was looking at new types of public service delivery and trying to introduce TSO into the actually delivery so they won more services, so it was a lot of focus on only on social enterprises but actually speeding public services out of the public sector before social enterprises, charities and, you know, and cooperatives and so on. I think there is a phrases from Francis Mode (…) was minister at the time. I think his ambition was to get 1 million public sector staff into mutual (...) so that agenda pretty much collapsed. I was doing some research on it I think (2011-2012) when was presented this was something that could transform public services because the arguments were that the public sector was held back by bureaucracy but a culture to have control, so if you help these services, you know, to spin up the public sector and to become independent and to become self-sufficient, so to be more innovative, creative, and so on. Bu the evidence didn’t really stack off (…) on that was very strong. Ehm, and alongside that agenda, it related to the (..) agenda actually, was find ways to reduce demand on public services and to achieve financial savings. Currently the way how the public services are set up they are not preventative, they are inefficient, and they all go messy, they all are about meeting need and don’t build resilience and to empower communities to achieve outcomes without public help. But again I think those. I think is difficult to promote that kind of agenda, to promote prevention in the context of austerity so I think that under the weight of the financial crises, councils, although they…I think there is been pockets of innovation, but, by and large, they haven’t been able to achieve the scale transformation that they might have wanted because of the financial pressures. And social value I think, social value Act, has spoken to both bits of the agenda, because if you follow the literature often is seemed that if you provide public services you know that might have more focus on social value, obviously you are going to achieve financial savings on long term, because you are helping people much earlier which means that later on their needs will not escalate and therefore they do not put too much pressure on public resources. So I think is interesting that social value conversation has (…) emerged in that context. So I think is not just about trying to use public sector to improve social outcome but also in the coalition how to use social value to achieve financial savings, how do you get communities to be more responsible for their own sort of outcomes, how we let’s move away from this public sector led provision of services and, early one was called Big Society, which I think was a terrible, terrible concept. But it sort of, I think much of it that comes from this perspective is ultimately taking responsibility away from state in little certain things and giving that responsibility to others in society, whether there is the TSOs or the residents itself, businesses … So I think is part of that agenda to I guess to reframe what the state is, what the state does, what the state deliver to people. So, I think that’s how I see it, in terms of that wider context.

CM Does SVA made any difference for the VSOs?

IE Ehm, I will only been speculating it as I haven’t done any specific research on this. But from what I read, and what I seen, has opened up opportunities for TSOs to be considered as part of the commissioning and procurement process and clearly in certain authorities that taken it seriously it helped local charities to win contracts , so to deliver services and so on. So, to some extent yes, but, at the same time, I think there is a gap in terms of capacity, knowledge and understanding of charities, and specially the small charities when it comes to commissioning and procurement, traditionally in the UK. It’s been done a huge scales and the sorts of the organizations that win public contracts are large organizations that could offer economies of scale. It’s been much more difficult for smaller organizations, including charities, of course, there is the larger TSOs that knows and are doing well but is the smaller ones that do not have the capacity and haven’t benefitted as much. So I think overall it’s been positive, but there is clearly room for improvement. I think maybe emphasize in the social value Act aren’t strong enough, so I notice that its uses as public bodies should ‘consider’ such a think rather than ‘have to’ apply. And that means, ultimately, from the perspective of commissioner’s, even if they go down the road it is just about lowest cost possible, that’s fine, as long they make it sounds that they considers social value. But they really have to apply it if they don’t want so, I think, still there are a lot of concerns from the part of the commissioners, you know, part of the austerity. Austerity it made this much worsen. If you look at social care for example, it is all about getting lower cost possible and that’s partly because of the financial reality that the local authorities are in. And that isn’t something that’s conducive to charities, especially small local rooted charities when coming to contracts as they cannot compete with big providers, it is just too difficult. So I think in that respect there is more to be done. And also, I think is also an issues with what social value under the Act applies to. So I think the Act applies to services but there is other types of public spending that it could apply to, you know goods, like works, I think there is potential to expand to, maybe that’s something that should be looked at because it is not just about services. And I know that there are certain local authorities, I don’t know if you heard about P. council. Yes, they got this model of community wellfield, I think that’s interesting because partly is about ensuring that all types of public spending help the local economy and help local people. So it is not just about local services, it is about looking at the totality of spending in a local area and trying to keep it within that local area so you are achieving local economic benefits and also there is a very coordinated approach, so it is not just a particular service it is an entire council collaborating with the other parts of the local sectors like, the NHS for example and you know, other services that are around in the local control. So I will say, it is a more effective approach to social value because it is coordinated across an entire city or a place and it involves collaboration between different actors, so it is not just one a particular manager, or particular service saying giving X, Y weighting of social value, it is not isolated like that but part of a coordinated effort. And I think in P., if I remember correctly, in 2012, I think about 40% of local spending by public organizations of P., went to local companies, local actors. In two years, by 2014, that went up to 28% so you can see that is a significant impact through a coordinated effort. So, I think partly is about improving legislation and support of central government to help charities, and councils and other organizations to do this more effectively but also is about council taking the initiative, demonstrating that he can do it independently of all this staff. And you see a place like P. where actually it can have an impact. So, ya, I think broadly the Social Value Act has been positive, I think clearly it can be improved but also I think if we want to promote social value in public service procurement and also in the public service decision-making then is not just about only social value Act (…) it is also about other domains that you ned to be interested in that includes the approach taken by the local authorities, the approach taken by the NHS and so on. So, it is not just about Social Value Act. The Social Value Act is helpful because beyond that…and I think, you know, even before the SV Act came into place the local authorities was doing the same think, there were using the community benefits clauses, so, it happened before, some argues that some part of the social value act wasn’t strictly necessarily, as legally was possible to do all this staff before. So, ya, I think broadly has been good, is clearly room for improvement, but if you want to promote social value is has to look beyond just the act and look to policies, the decisions the approaches taken by a range of stakeholders.

CM There are any barriers around the understanding of SVA and how to use it in practice?

IE I think, ehm, as I said I didn’t do any research on this, and I base this on what I read, but I think clearly is a gap in terms of knowledge and capacity and the gap particular effects smaller organizations, either that are small businesses or smaller charities. I know those things like Commissioning Academy and Cabinet Office () but I don’t think, charities in particular, have received sufficient support and guidance to it, to be able to take advantage of it.

CM How you would articulate and define social value?

IE Ya, that’s an interesting one, as I think it become a buzz word social value I mean it can literally mean anything, and I guess I would describe it as a quantification of an outcome or outcomes that are beneficial to society in some way. So it’s a contrast to the economic value, that you have the chance to see it though things like GDP and jobs created and so on. And it is a contrast to financial value which tends to be seen through, you know, cost benefit analysis to some extent but also financial savings and so on. So, I think, in the past, ideally, we wouldn’t have been in a situation when actually we didn’t need to articulate social value and have an entire act for social value because public sector was doing that anyway. But because we focus so much on costs and financial value and economic value in the past that meant that is been a clear gap that now is beginning to be filled and I think to that extent social value is a useful concept because it encourages commissioners, encourages policy makers to think of a wider range of outcomes when they otherwise wouldn’t have. They think about the role of the policy and the services beyond just delivering a particular service. It is about seeing the wider impact that that service can provide not only to the end recipients but to the wider community. So if you doing social care it is not necessarily just about the quality of care you are providing to the individual in a particular care need but is also the wider benefits, so it is helping local micro business get involved in the supply chains of delivery. It is promoting greater cohesion in the community, it create easy bonds between older people and younger people, those types of impact that in the past haven’t necessarily been quantified or appreciated. I think that’s a particular value.

CM How can be quantified the non-tangible aspects?

IE Ya, I think that’s an interesting one, I know there is existing methodologies like social return on investment which I think there are legitimate criticisms of those type of methodologies just because is actually quite difficult to quantify it. Social outcome, especially outcomes that often are not visible straight away but takes many years to achieve, I think there is a way that we can apply in the way, you know, evaluate things currently, so cost benefit analysis for example, could incorporate more social dimensions do (…) already, they can do so more, and I think is possible to develop other type of methodology that might be better at capturing these sorts of things. You know, if its straightforward things like, ok, though commissioning in a different way we managed to involve more local businesses in supply, that’s a form of social value, and is something that can be quantified very easily. If it is something like this is contributing to social capital or sense of community cohesion or community pride, those things are more intangible and more difficult to measure directly, so I think there is different ways of looking at it, there are certain things that you clearly you can’t quantify quite easily, there are certain things that slightly are more difficult to quantify, but I’m sure, you know, there are approaches that can help you quantify them so, I think is a challenge, so, I think some of the tools that are used currently aren’t so great, like social return on investment, I’m not entirely convinced by it, but I think there is alternatives that could do the job better and clearly there are ways of quantifying services of social benefit (…)

CM How SVA encourages the local council?

IE I think generally, is a fact that it is non –prescriptive, as it doesn’t tell local authorities what is or not it is social value, and how they should apply it. As I do think different communities, different places will have different understandings of social value and they will have different challenges to each other. And having a different definition, in a single way doing things I don’t think is helpful and I think is important for the local authorities to consult other stakeholders when determine what social value actually is because it is such a, I think is a very loose term, is not, is clearly not very well defined and ultimately you can use it to mean everything you want. So, I think it has to be a clear process, I think it should be a clear process, involving local authorities, commissioners, service users and the wide community to determine what they mean by social value. You know, there is places that probably consulted and probably done that, and I think that’s right, but I think, it should be a shared understanding across the place, across the local authority, across the city, across the community and shouldn’t just be something that you know, is defined by commissioners or is defined by service managers. It think it has to have that border input. And, you know, like I said, for that reason I think is a positive that there is not too much prescription from (…)

CM The VSOs as service provider, are engaged in share understanding on SV Policy with the local councils?

IE I think, one of the weaknesses in local councils is that I think in the recent years they made a lot of their role, as community leaders, as organizations that understand how local communities work, as organizations that are not just bureaucracies but are actually part of the infrastructure of place, but I think in reality, that’s not necessarily true for many councils. I think the history of local government in the UK is a very technocratic one, so Councils are being very corporatist type of organizations that are very good at delivering services, which are very good at doing things professionally and through bureaucracy but there is clearly a disconnect between local authorities, senior officers in particular and the communities that they serve. So, I think the extent to which the local authority could argue it has an understanding of social value that local people share is questionable whereas I think TSOs have a much more connection to people and have much greater, much deeper networks into neighbourhoods, within communities , you know, among different groups and society. So, if you wanted to, you know, initiate a process of developing a shared understanding for social value, arguably, the council should be leading that process, it should be a community and TSOs that are anchored within that place, that has a better understanding of local people, has a better understanding of how to engage the local people and how to do community engagement. The local councils are not good at doing that they are good at delivering services, you know, to serve a certain standard but I think there is TSOs that are especially good at that community engagement, especially smaller organizations.

CM What engagement role could play VSOs in the service specification in the pre-commissioning?

IE Yes, I think that VSOs could be a crucial intermediary between the council and commissioners that I guess define the local need and the people who want to achieve certain outcomes, so who want so who want certain thinks that being services. So I think that the TSOs do a great job at engaging and communicating with local people, communities so they have I guess a deeper understanding of what their needs and aspirations are. I think the way the councils and commissioners tend to evaluate and understand social need is quite narrow. But if you want to do something like, promote social value, I think you need have to have an expanded view of what this need actually mean for local people. And to really get an understanding of that you have to talk to people in different way and I think the voluntary organizations are better at doing that and they have more expertise and knowledge of the type of techniques and methods and tool they need, but you need to do that, so, ya, I think they ca play a crucial role in helping council to identify needs and expectations in better way.

CM What can you tell me about the SVA and its link to social inclusion agenda?

IE Yes, definitely, I find quite strange that we haven’t started to look at this issues earlier because if you look at how much public sector spent in the UK it is a huge amount. And if you use that money slightly differently you can achieve a lot of additional social, environmental and economic value and I think actually I lot of what I see from councils is that I lot of the interest around social value is related to inclusion agenda, so social inclusion (..) so often is about, ok, are we creating jobs for local people, are we retaining the economic benefits of the service locally, are the supply chains local, are we helping local businesses to people so on. So I think from the beginning the agenda had a link to the social inclusion, it is creating employment opportunities, it is creating training opportunities to helping and supporting local businesses, SMS and so on. I think that’s the many of the potential lays in. I think P. is interesting for that reason. So I think the idea of community of wellbeing, the term is instructing, is not just about, you know, is not just about increasing social value, it is about increasing wealth within the places. So there they are using public spending, using procurement differently to achieve economic outcomes that support groups that otherwise would have been disadvantaged and that build institutions that help local places to generate and develop economically. I think their approach, as I mentioned earlier, is all about coordinated approach to social value, and it is not just about what the council can do, it’s about what the rest of the public sector can do, what the voluntary sector can do, what citizens and local businesses can do, so it is more like building an (…) system. And applying that economic lens. That sort of place based lens I think is critically important. And as part of that coordination effort, TSO clearly play a critical role, and you know. For example I seen, you know, when social value has been considered or explored it tends to be a role of the sector within that.

CM Could you tell me more about the P council case?

From what I seen, they say SV Act it definitely helped, I think you can look at social value act in a number of way. So, one way is a legalistic way of seeing how the Act influenced the behaviour of the commissioners and whether achieved what is intended to achieve. Another way of looking at it is the extent to which the Social Value Act has trigger and sparked different types of conversations to do things differently even if they are not necessarily related exactly to the social value act. So in the case of P., the Social Value Act even if it is not directly related to everything they do it is still on their minds to help them to think about particular issues in a different way. So it served that sort of function as well. I guess it changed the term as well ..() and opened people up to new ideas, new concepts, new opportunities. So it is not necessarily what Social Value Act is compelling commissioners to do, it is more about how it’s getting organizations getting people to think differently and have different types of conversations and you know, develop new types of approaches to issues. So, I think that’s, it is an underexplored target, but I think is an important part of it. Yea, so the example of P. is interesting because, I think their interest in this community wealth building model did sort of pick when all of this very public debate about social value is going on. So I think it helped to move the public debate along a little bit, and I don’t think that should be underappreciated because as it has been an important element of the Social Value Act.

CM Any other cases samples?

IE Ya, so I know, you only looking for things under social value act or before that, because I think a really good case study was with Glasgow and the Commonwealth games. It wasn’t the last one I think was the one before. But they applied community benefit clauses to a lot of their contracts as part of the Commonwealth games. From what I remember that was quite positive in terms of the outcomes they achieved. I used to manage and coordinate this network for local authorities –you might go on their websites- corporative council innovation network – they got exceptional case studies and I would say that quite few of them relate to procurement and social value so it is worth looking at that, and probably you can contact them and give you case studies. …() city councils was a good one, as well, I think generally have been many local authority that has tried to do this sort of think, I’m just not sure of specific details and outcomes but a good place to start will be corporative councils innovation network.

CM Can you give more details on this?

IE Ya, I definitely think is worth looking at cooperative council innovation network and I think one of the councils that started that was L. council, this idea of a cooperative council, and their vision originally was for the local government to move beyond this very paternalistic relationships between residents and the council and move for something that it is more empowering. Part of their agenda was about, you know, looking at different types of delivery beyond council, so they looked at public service mutual agenda for example, cooperatives and so on, enterprises as potential options, and I think that also took them to social value, also took them to, they developed a notion of cooperative commissioning, which is really interesting and again that’s has coproduction and is (..). So we were talking earlier about how community need to be involved in in identifying need and the attached services they want , do they applied that, I think they did it in particular for youth service. I just remember an event a few years ago, it was really interesting, because they we talking about (…) these commissioners and how they apply to use services and how that changed the way how the commissioners thought, so when they actually started asking people what they wanted from these services, so, some of the young people, that for example were having mental health issues, and rather than saying they wanted more formal mental health services, some of the things will say, they wanted more services that help building confidence, that help them make CV and apply jobs. And that was really interesting as it help commissioners to think very differently the type of support, and commissioned services might offer and I think that’s really interesting when you actually put people at the heart of the commissioning, what impact that has and clearly is related to the relationships back to social value.

CM What you can tell me about C. Council as a case study?

IE Yes, C., is in the cooperative council’s innovation network and I spoke to Y. and the chief executive and senior director a couple of years ago, they seemed taking it really seriously. So if you want a case study on social value commissioning I think that might be a good one.

CM Thank you very much.