

## **Stepahead Support**

### **Background**

Stepahead Support has been delivering support services to children, young people and families in Kent since 1999 through funding received predominantly from KCC. Prior to the rebranding to Stepahead Support the services were known as Moving Forward and Breakthrough. In the main the contracts were year on year rolling, with the occasional one for 3 years with multiple short term extensions as the commissioning process was introduced. KCC's decision in 2011 to invite organisations to apply to be accepted onto a framework was welcomed as a means to identify organisations who delivered high quality services within high quality standards. This ideal was good, as it would enable KCC to commission services from organisations that reached the required standard. The original acceptance % level was reduced, allowing many more organisations the opportunity to tender for future work than would have originally been eligible. This approach did not encourage a positive and transparent commissioning relationship between KCC and service providers with the message being that KCC didn't realise how many contracts they currently funded and their purpose.

#### **a) Role as Commissioning Organisation and Strategic Context**

- What does successful commissioning look like? What do we do well and what can we improve? Are we an intelligent client? Do we know what we want and don't want?

Successful commissioning needs to consider intelligence regarding the need, the desired outcomes and previous/current good models of service delivery. Relationships between commissioning and those awarded a contract must be effective and co-operative with strong communication. Commissioning should look to compliment and/or enhance existing services based on a clear and evidenced based understanding on need, outcomes achieved and gaps in service delivery. Existing and potential service users should play a role in the development of services and the tendering process.

Commissioning has been less than effective in the past and to an extent now, with KCC being unclear of what they need a service to look like and what it should achieve. This had led to decommissioning of services and a delay in the re-commissioning of new services, leaving service users without access to support and organisations forced to make redundancies. Other services have been commissioned with little communication between government funded services e.g. KCC, CAMHS, and Offending. Focusing purely on the need to reduce expenditure quickly is not an intelligent way to commission effectively in the long term. KCC should work proactively with the sector rather than being reactive to external pressures.

The Q & A part of the tender process is generally good and provider events allow an insight into the process. There have been occasions where it is more a case of KCC using the events to glean information from the providers to better inform their decision making, however if this leads to a needs led tender being released, then that is positive.

KCC must be fair and equitable and provide adequate financial resources to deliver the requirements of a specification. They must also keep to timeframes they set for themselves, as they expect the providers to do.

#### **d) Commissioning/Contract Management – Do we decommission / re-commission services based on performance?**

Stepahead has specific experience of a service being decommissioned before a re-commissioning process began. This service had not had any issues raised regarding performance and was documented as a well regarded and highly valuable service. Therefore the assumption is that the decommissioning and re-commission was not based on performance but driven by financial considerations. The timeline from beginning to end of the process was December 2010 to March 2013. The impact of KCC's management of the process resulted in 4 rounds of staff being put at risk, uncertainty for service users and ended with staff being made redundant due to the gap in decommissioning and re-commissioning. Although successful at the tender stage, many experienced staff were employed elsewhere.

- **Contract monitoring – What are the realities of outcome focused commissioning?**

It is absolutely right that commissioning has to focus on outcomes. In the past KCC has often focused on outputs and numbers rather than the impact on service users. However, the journey travelled to reach the outcome is even more important and rigid contract monitoring reduces the ability to demonstrate this effectively. Generic monitoring forms that are intended to fit all services delivered within the early intervention services to record outcomes are cumbersome, time consuming and often irrelevant. The time spent completing those takes staff away from delivering frontline work, and the cost for delivers can be high in terms of creating bespoke databases to capture information.

In the past contracts were monitored by local managers who had a real understanding of the service, how it operated and the outcomes it achieved. This allowed for strong relationships to be built enabling for quick resolution of issues and response to new identified need. Innovation could be nurtured with local variations to contract to meet specific, local need agreed. County wide contracts with strict and inflexible terms of service delivery stifle any innovation there may be. Recent restructures within KCC have seen multiple changes to contract officers, some of whom have no local or specific knowledge of the service being delivered. The contract reviews have moved from being a meeting of equals to a Headteacher: pupil relationship. Scrutiny is good, but it must be proportional to the size and nature of the contract and allow for scrutiny both ways. The process can feel process driven and not relationship building.

- **Contract length**

Increasing contract awards to 3 years in length is a vast improvement that allows services to fully develop their models of delivery and integrate them with other relevant services. It supports small organisations with sustainability and enables them to work with service users and communities to achieve long term outcomes and mutually supportive environments. It is a vast improvement on the historic yearly rolling contracts, often with no formal review of the contract taking place.

## **Conclusion**

It is acknowledged that the introduction of commissioning through tendering has been a learning curve for KCC and deliverers alike. The systems and processes have forced some deliverers to withdraw from the market, irrespective of the quality of the services delivered. The process favours larger, more experienced providers who have the resources in terms of time and staff to respond to opportunities. With a high emphasis on price, it also favours those organisations that have the financial capacity to absorb costs elsewhere in their organisation. Requirements regarding offices, insurance levels, TUPE implications and monitoring can exclude some providers or dissuade them from submitting a tender, despite having the working practices and skills to deliver effective and high quality services. With a rigid

procurement process, pockets of excellent service are lost where small organisations cease operating when they lose a contract.

The one aspect that is in danger of being lost are the children, young people and families who need support to bring about positive changes to their lives and who are reliant on KCC commissioning services that meet their needs.