Planting the SEEDS of a new charity

Four women with experience of domestic abuse started a community group called SEEDS Bath, to empower and educate both domestic abuse services and themselves in what proved to be a mutual learning process. SEEDS Bath was based upon an existing model for service user participation in the shaping and provision of services called SEEDS (Survivors Educating and Empowering Domestic abuse Services), which began c. 10 years ago and developed across the Southwest of England. At one point or another, there have been SEEDS groups in Devon, North Somerset, Torbay, Dorset, Cornwall, and more recently, in Shropshire.

This model of voluntary participation by domestic abuse survivors in local consultation and strategy forums was, however, developed by its founding figures in a very different landscape, in terms of local authority and commissioning provision. Generally, such groups only survived and thrived where they received local authority funding and were run by paid facilitators, with volunteers receiving a small payment for attendance. None of this is either available today, or indeed even allowed by benefit rules that govern the lives of many domestic abuse survivors rebuilding their lives.

The SEEDS Bath group was founded very much with an awareness that funding and service provision had been profoundly transformed by structural and economic changes. Furthermore, the group developed into a model of service provision, which went far beyond the original SEEDS concept of voluntary work in awareness raising and consultation. The group learned that, where high risk was not perceived, there was very little dedicated provision within the area of Bath and Northeast Somerset for women (and even less for men) coming out of abusive relationships and practically no tailored support for honour-based violence and ethnic minority victims. We started a peer-support and confidence building programme to support other women in the local community and to draw on their knowledge and experience. We outgrew SEEDS to become a service provider, and formed a charity VOICES, registered in December 2014.

VOICES now work with other local organisations, art therapists, music teachers, life coaches and business consultants and draw upon our own skills and experiences and encouraging skill sharing between women that we work with. We have consulted with the local council (largely through Bath and Northeast Somerset’s Community Safety provision), the office of the Avon & Somerset Police and Crime Commissioner, have provided training to the police & probation, take referrals from mental health, social services, local job centres, Genesis Trust, DHI, and Southside Family Project. We sit on the IVASP (Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Strategic Partnership) board and are contributing to the IRIS (Identification & Referral to Improve Safety) Steering Group within the NHS. We contribute to regular consultations with SafeLives (formerly Coordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse), and provide advice one day a week at the council-run One Stop Shop in Bath, alongside council services and other third-sector organisations. We are working together with another charity with the aim of providing activity holidays for survivors and their children, and hope with them to develop other positive support activities to strengthen survivors in their role as parents.
Meanwhile, the SEEDS Bath ethos continues to exist: We now run and facilitate a group of volunteers who are also DV survivors, sponsor their training and involve them in our work.

However, in the charity world, VOICES remains a small group. Given our background, we face a rather specific set of challenges, both personal and professional. Between us, we have personal experience of generational abuse, honour-based violence, bereavement, homelessness, bankruptcy related to abuse and credit or simply banking problems as a result, moving countries, or just across the UK, prolonged court cases and ongoing child-contact and financial concerns relating to ex-partners. We have all been users of multiple services. We regard these experiences, however, as potential strengths.

We started with 100 pounds, and were unable even to bank this at first because no bank would give us a bank account. We had no premises to work from, no infrastructure, no larger charity behind us, and no local authority funding. We discovered that forming a new charity, as a CIO - a new charitable form - is very challenging and that a newly established charity application offering a gender-specific service can have problems achieving registration with the Charities Commission because of the provisions within the 2010 Equalities Act.

Having had a rather negative early experience of trying to situate our work within a larger charity, we realised that we would have to find a sustainable basis for independence. We had to think about how we could do this on our own, without resources or infrastructure.

We soon decided, however, that working out how to overcome these issues could be a useful lesson in itself. So we began to find solutions. We set up an account with Bristol Credit Union – and we became the first community group for which they provided a ‘Share 2’ account for community groups. We also applied to the Avon & Somerset PCC Community Action Fund and were awarded 5,000 pounds, which marked a breakthrough in our attempts to establish the group locally.

We received a small grant from a community foundation to carry out research, which we chose to focus upon the factors influencing disclosure of domestic abuse.

A further significant breakthrough came with the involvement of the South West Community Foundation, who gave us the benefit of many years working with small charities and community groups to help us construct a healthy basis for a small organisation. We sought advice, consulted other organisations and got training. Finally, we educated ourselves about charitable foundations, chose what we thought the most sustainable and flexible form, and worked out how to meet the Charities Commission’s criteria, particularly on equalities and gender-specific services, something about which specific advice is lacking on the Charities Commission website.

We are proud of what we have achieved to date. However, significant problems remain. We have entered into the sector at a very challenging time and some issues could turn out to be decisive for whether we can continue to thrive and grow, or are nipped in the bud.

These challenges are:

A *lack of core funding* – Everything we do to grow VOICES as an organisation, which does not form part of a project, is essentially voluntary.

*Difficulty finding suitable premises* – VOICES requires discreet, secure premises in which to meet with clients and discuss and store sensitive information. The concept of hub and hot desk working, which is very much seen as the way forward within local service provision, is not always appropriate
for us, or for other charities working with sensitive issues such as sexual or domestic violence, rape and honour-based violence.

**Capacity** - As a small organisation, it is difficult to find the capacity required to undertake the necessary work that lies behind a successful bid for commissioning services, to fulfil reporting obligations, and to manage services that meet the parameters for funding. Meanwhile, the emphasis of commissioning proposals tends to suggest that the core focus is not related to need or positive outcomes, but rather to demonstrating cost-effectiveness of service provision.

Remaining a purely voluntary group is also not an ideal solution to this problem: the nature of our experiences, and those of other survivors joining or supporting our service, is such that we are not best placed to undertake voluntary work without support or remuneration. Running a voluntary group in our spare time was not adequate to our aims or to our perception of the need we wished to address.

**What is specific about VOICES from the point of view of commissioning services?**

**VOICES** is:

- Service-user led, with an ethos of mutual exchange of knowledge and experience
- A small service
- A new organisation
- Locally-active provision

**What does the commissioning landscape appear to favour?**

- Expert-led or highly professionalised services with professional bid writers
- Large organisations (i.e. capacity is a determining factor for success)
- Established groups with established referral pathways and networks
- Supra-regional provision (e.g. services being commissioned at multiple locations, or a service based in one county being commissioned to provide DV support in another area, in some cases taking over from a local partnership, which included a survivor-led group)
- Demonstrable synergies and savings (cost as a key factor in commissioning decisions)
- Multi agency collaborative applications

The commissioning process itself, which includes a Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) aimed at setting certain preconditions that organisations must already satisfy to put together bids for commissioned services, is in danger of shutting smaller organisations out, or disqualifying them early on.

**What characterizes the current climate, specifically in the DV sector?**

The new funding climate means in some cases, there is sparse support even for crisis cases. In one case, a successful bid to run services did not include any provision for domestic abuse refuge services, with the result that a refuge run for 40 years was closed down, prompting large protests locally. The same provider taking on services in another county has meant the closure of 4 refuges there. Somerset’s change of provider in Taunton ended last year when the new refuge service closed down after inspectors had concerns about the way the refuge was being run, due to lack of support
for women residents. Bath refuge is largely occupied by non-local residents. This may not in itself be a bad thing but it does mean that the presence of the refuge in the area cannot be assumed to be necessarily meeting local need.

Restructured or diminishing resources to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse and their dependants raise concerns about whether local need or a money saving agenda is uppermost, and whether the search for the service provision that is seen as most cost-effective results in a generic, supra-regional approach to provision or is capable of supporting local community provision to meet the local need effectively. Even in areas where there would seem to be established good practice and effective service provision, for example in the urban area of Avon & Somerset, rural provision of and access to domestic abuse services may lag far behind and be patchy or even non-existent.

Responding to an evolving agenda in the sector can mean that the focus is upon ‘fire-fighting’ rather than preventive and restorative interventions, with money being channelled to the most high-risk cases or those fulfilling other specific threshold criteria, with increasing loopholes within which actual need may remain unmet. Early intervention and education measures may be neglected, at greater cost further down the line.

As a result, there is a low level of support in resource terms for those at perceived low risk. In an environment in which funding has been and continues to be low, risk criteria thresholds would seem sometimes to be applied in a way that can to exclude rather than include people in service provision.

**What is of relevance about the nature of domestic abuse for the commissioning process?**

Multiple research studies have confirmed that it is possible for victims of domestic abuse to move from being low to high risk within minutes, and also that degrees of risk may be hard to judge in a standardised or consistent way using checklist approaches alone.

Domestic abuse is a complex and diffuse phenomenon, which affects victims so profoundly and broadly that their self-esteem and trust in others is destroyed. This, together with fears about what a perpetrator may be capable of or about potentially losing their children if they disclose abuse, means that disclosing, seeking help and making changes to remove themselves from danger can be very hard. These actions rely upon the victim making a journey towards being in the right place to undertake them. This scenario comprises not simply service provision but also the presence of a proactive victim, making a personal journey from coping towards survival and recovery. It is long and fraught process, only complicated by the many issues around child contact where an abusive ex-partner is also parent.

Victims need support on a range of issues and rebuilding life is not a linear process but a jagged line of steps forwards and falling, or being pushed, backwards. People need accompaniment along the journey, rather than a one-off intervention. Recovery from domestic abuse involves prolonged, long-term issues, sometimes involving cross-generational experiences and impacts.

Thus it is in the nature of domestic abuse to be diffuse and multi-faceted, rather than comprising a single issue. Responses require a multi-agency and tailored approach, where the person may find themselves at the centre of a supportive system, not merely the object of multiple interventions and scrutiny. Unfortunately, the “professionalization” of DV support and services has not in every respect been a positive thing
Recommendations: Considerations for commissioners of DV service provision

Based on everything set out above, VOICES would argue for the balance between delivery and cost considerations to be carefully considered, allowing for the commissioning process and strategy to provide support for local, community-based, specialized DV services.

VOICES would welcome a commissioning approach that accords value to sustained, responsive, local community services, which can provide evidence of a focus on the empowerment of victims and survivors to enable them to help themselves as far as possible.

A strong focus on obtaining feedback from those who use services commissioned, especially those in vulnerable situations, e.g. in refuges, would enable commissioners to monitor such services users’ experience of service provision and learn from problems that arise.

Commissioning should provide the support that will enable small services to have real impact over time and to bed down in their local environment, rather than being forced to continually reinvent themselves or their services in order to achieve funding success or continuation of existing funding.

VOICES would like to see commissioning strategy consider empowerment models, not only cost-savings in the short term and the synergies that can be demonstrated by (usually larger) organisations. Small, effective, local organisations can be very cost-effective in the wider picture, if they achieve sustained improvement in the lives of DV survivors.

The VOICES Model of Empowerment

VOICES’ approach supports the power, potential and capabilities of women themselves who seek help. It is their VOICE of experience and aspiration to a safe and productive life that should be heard, and we hope our charity will reflect and frame this in an ethical and positive way.

If we succeed in doing so, we are confident that many other small organisations working with domestic abuse victims and survivors could (and, indeed, in some cases do already) achieve similar results across the country.