

# Best value and the voluntary sector

## **Mary Weastell, Bradford City Council's Strategic Director of Performance and Commissioning offered a commissioner's eye view of relations with the voluntary and community sector.**

Achieving the differences that people want the council and its partners to make in their lives will only happen with robust performance management between local authorities and the voluntary and community sector. The Commissioners role is to challenge and scrutinise; to improve how achievements are measured and establish evidence to show that a difference is being made.

The focus in Bradford for the foreseeable future is on three ambitious targets to:

- Regenerate the city and major towns
- Improve skills at all levels
- Improve educational outcomes

Commissioners want the voluntary and community sector to play its part as an equal partner. The current changes offer the chance for fairer opportunities to develop. The Bradford District Partnership has established the Bradford District Assembly to be the voice of the diverse voluntary and community sector, to enable clear, representative, reciprocal communication.

Mary spoke of her frustration that the evidence required by national indicators often fails to truly measure the impact and outcomes of local activities. She feels it is important to collect and act on information above and beyond what is needed by central government.

As a Total Place pilot Bradford has learnt a lot about measuring value for money. It also has good experience of monitoring, tracking and managing the collective set of benefits that come from working with the voluntary and community sector. Mary acknowledged the difficulty of doing this when building infrastructure. She feels that, "There's a big discussion to have with government around the measurement of benefits and efficiencies and savings." She is interested in how the public and voluntary sector can help each other to measure the outcomes that are most needed.

The primary focus of a commissioning framework should be the outcomes to citizens and communities. It's about improving understanding of places, people and communities. A review of the third sector in Bradford identified the need to improve how the council involved the voluntary sector when commissioning services. This has led to a new Compact that endorses what is important for joint working and guides managers in doing business with third sector and vice versa. There is also now a multi-agency commissioning forum who use and promote the Cabinet Office's 'Eight Principles of Good Commissioning'.

Mary acknowledged tension from the sector about fairness. The true costs of services need to be understood and covered to ensure that services are sustainable.

The way business is being done is changing, services are being remodelled and this means that there are opportunities for the voluntary sector. Now is the time for honesty, it's the only way for us to work well together and build resilience. Commissioners might be able to offer a different type of support to the voluntary sector and vice versa. The relationship can change – let's talk about it and explore it.