The independent sector: similarities and differences

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This paper covers three areas:

- establishing pilot schemes for black communities
- developing independent sector services in black communities
- models of good practice in terms of working with external organisations in partnership.

Background

Newham bills itself as one of the poorest, most 'in need' boroughs in the country. When looking at the levels of housing, including homelessness and home ownership, or education, or employment, Newham regularly appears at the wrong end of the statistics. It is among the ten boroughs with the worst housing, poorest education and highest unemployment rates. When these social statistics are seen in the context of overt racism throughout the borough, it can be seen that the circumstances for black communities in Newham are even more difficult than they are for the indigenous population.

In Newham, there is no flourishing private sector clamouring at the social services department's doors anxious to provide or take on the management of existing and new services, let alone develop new ones. So in looking at the independent sector – private, not-for-profit and voluntary organisations, what are the similarities and the differences? For the purposes of this presentation, there will be some very broad and sweeping generalisations. However, by making comparisons, we are not necessarily offering any judgements, promoting one approach over the other. When looking at the Newham context the distinctions between private and voluntary sector have become increasingly blurred.

The issue of race and anti-discriminatory practices and policies must not be lost. Whether a service provider is in the private, not-for-profit or

voluntary sector makes little difference to how black-managed organisations are perceived and treated by service developers in the statutory sector.

There is scepticism – the continual questioning of the ability and capacity of black providers to provide services; a non-acceptance of different values which counter white, Euro-centric and traditional values; and relief that at least there is someone to provide services to those communities. There is also frequently a lack of respect – because some black organisations have different values and value systems and express themselves in different terms. This sort of patronising attitude – for example, 'We'll try, but we (the Department), do not think that you will be able to achieve much' – does not bode well for community relations. Finally, there is racism which, whilst contrary to all procedures, continues in various guises, making issues more complex than necessary, by not sharing information or misinforming organisations.

The current administration has succeeded, as indicated earlier, in blurring many distinctions and heightening others; class blurred, education separate, housing separate, health blurred, race separate. Where once it was common currency to expect that a hospital had a casualty department and that patients would be seen, now public sector and private sector produce charters for every service, be it public transport, the post office or the health service. Yet, there is less expectation and confidence in the actual service.

If this is the backdrop to how people now perceive themselves when they go to a GP, or indeed an accident and emergency department, then it is fair to say that the once seemingly vast distinctions between private and public are no more, and probably less, relevant now than ever before.

The independent sector – similarities

Service providers generally want success, they want to continue to survive and provide services, and to continue to be able to do what they are doing. They also want to be respected by users and by organisations that are buying services from them. They want to be able to respond to the needs of their user group. Service providers also want to expand – not necessarily in order to dominate, but in order to provide a service to their maximum capacity.

The independent sector – differences

Providers may use different languages. For instance, while the voluntary and not-for-profit sectors in Newham, and in London for that matter, may adopt the language and ethics of political correctness, and will talk about users, consultation and if we are lucky equality issues, private businesses

in the caring sector may not use the same terms although they may hold similar values.

Private organisations may have less protracted decision-making processes, while voluntary organisations may have more bureaucratic management and consultation structures which lengthen the decision-making process. Enthused with the business ethos that 'time is money', private organisations may move quickly and be more focused on the task in hand.

The private sector may, however, be constrained in its ability to take risks and therefore adopt a conservative approach to service development because of the financial implications of 'bad decisions'.

The voluntary sector may have a tendency to pay lip service to the idea of accountability. There may be a blurring of the line between advocating for a particular service, which means the continuation of an organisation, and advocating for a user, which could be to the detriment of the organisation. Private businesses do not have such quandaries.

The independent sector – similarities and differences

In terms of developing services, there is little difference between the private and voluntary sectors. As long as they are receiving a good service, communities do not really care if the service is provided by a private business, a not-for-profit agency or a voluntary organisation.

As can be seen from the preceding discussion there are few tangible differences between the sectors and it is perhaps the perception of these differences which has perpetuated the notion of difference. It is therefore more important when developing services to keep the nature and quality of provision for the users as the centre of the focus, rather than whether the provider is a voluntary organisation, a not-for profit agency or a private organisation.

For black organisations however, there continues to be a perception that they are not up to providing a service. Service development continues to seek to provide a service that resembles what they already know, not one that necessarily provides an effective user focused service. Such an approach will by definition exclude black providers.