

Reflections on the Seminar Series:

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In preparation for this session, I have looked back at the seminar series and identified what – for me – were four of the key themes.

The Third Sector is very diverse

Third sector organisations are very different from each other. This point was made by many speakers during the seminar series and is evident from the research of Rosie Meek and colleagues at TSRC. Third sector organisations are very different in all sorts of ways: size, geographical coverage, budget, use of paid or volunteer workers, business/commercial approach, political perspective, ‘critical friend or thorn in flesh’, effectiveness, competence.

The implications of this include:

- Theoretical perspectives on the third sector must take account of this. If not, then most statements about the sector are likely to be unhelpful generalisations.
- Policy moves that benefit one part of the sector will not benefit others.
- Diversity a strength of the sector
- How can we have a vibrant pluralism – not conformity brought about by a particular commissioning or competition mechanism?

Service User participation and contribution make a difference

The seminar series has highlighted the importance of involving service users in the planning, delivery and evaluation of projects in a number of ways.

These include

- The need for campaigning groups to work closely with – for example – prisoners and prisoners families to be able to campaign credibly on their behalf.
- The development of services for minority groups often neglected by mainstream services (e.g. womens groups)
- The opportunity for ex-offenders and ex-prisoners to work in roles such as peer mentors, support workers and volunteers (e.g. St Giles Trust project at P’boro prison)
- The chance for feedback and user involvement that has a genuine impact on the way that services are delivered

Three implications of this include:

- This can be challenging territory for the public service (because of the public protection agenda) – although there are relevant developments in the probation service (e.g. service user councils)

- The work of academics such as McNeill and Maruna suggests that, for some people, the chance to 'make good' and to make a positive contribution to society (maybe by volunteering to support others) can be an important part of the journey away from crime.
- It is not always obvious to the public sector (probation and prison) who the principal service user is. Is it the court, the wider public? Or is it the offender? This is not usually a confusion in the voluntary sector – but could become one if the sector takes on an increasingly criminal justice role.

More social justice: less criminal justice

This point is a reminder that the solution to reducing crime in society is not going to be found by making changes (even quite big changes) to the criminal justice system. There are hazards associated with developments that turn TSOs from social justice organisations into criminal justice ones.

Current measures and use of private sector mean penal expansion in the community. Organisations in the private sector exist to make money for shareholders. Third sector organisations need to secure business to maintain employment of staff.

Why do we have to pay to get what works? Is the market the best way to distribute social justice?

We are seeing a cluster of funding arrangements and contractual levers that erode the autonomy of workers and their agencies and suck them into a criminal justice agenda. The voluntary sector is asked to take on tasks that do not sit happily with its charitable mission in order to survive in the market.

The challenge for research

Research and evaluation of criminal justice initiatives are not technical exercises (not even sophisticated technical exercises). They open up questions of mission, values and purposes. For example, what should be evaluated? How should it be measured? Who should measure it and when? Are all results equally important (or only those that will be paid for)?

This is brought into sharp focus by the idea of payment by results – but these questions are important whatever the prevailing policy framework.

The seminar series has usefully contributed to this debate by highlighting a number of points, including

- Joint work between TSOs and researchers – from a very early stage – can help establish baselines and agreed outcomes and ensure that relevant data is collected and recorded
- It is inconvenient for national commissioners that projects will develop (for very good reasons) in different places in different ways
- The problem that commercial confidentiality make open exploration and sharing of ideas less possible
- Role of the researcher – critical friend, independent assessor, committed campaigner?

- It is important to be at the table where outcome measures are agreed