



Community  
Southwark

# Commissioning Report 2024/25: The Value of Collaborative Commissioning



# 1. Table of contents

1.	Table of contents	2
2.	Background	3
3.	Issues affecting VCS organisations	5
	• Issue 1: tendering processes.....	5
	• Issue 2: commissioning with the same providers, at the expense of sharing opportunities with the VCS .....	5
	• Issue 3: technical jargon used by commissioners .....	6
	• Issue 4: Contracting requirements placing a high-level of burden on VCS organisations .....	6
	• Issue 5: safeguarding .....	6
4.	Collaborative commissioning	7
	• A lead provider .....	8
	• Co-design .....	9
	• Longer contracts.....	9
5.	Recommendations	10
	• Recommendation 1: review decision-making processes in statutory organisations .....	10
	• Recommendation 2: a needs assessment on extending tender deadlines .....	10
	• Recommendation 3: improving tenders by using plain English.....	11
	• Recommendation 4: training groups to become ‘commissioning ready’ .....	11
	• Recommendation 5: a mental health consortium .....	12
6.	Conclusion	13



## 2. Background

In 2023, Community Southwark published its [State of the Southwark Voluntary and Community Sector Report](#). The report contained a brief section on commissioning which, as defined by the Local Government Association, “is the strategic activity of identifying need, allocating resources and procuring a provider to best meet that need, within available means.”<sup>1</sup> This section was earmarked for further research, as commissioning is an important means by which statutory organisations distribute funds to the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS).

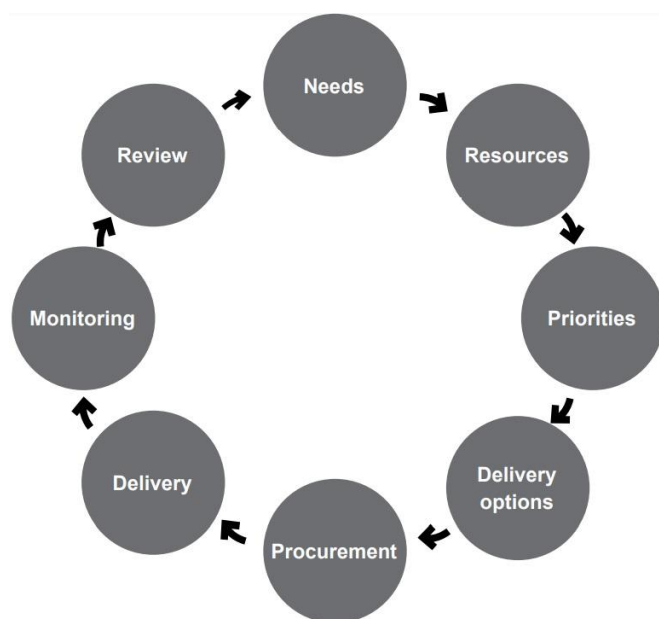
As will be explained in the report, some VCS organisations do not have the capacity to engage in commissioning, which is typically more complex and time-consuming than other funding processes. Therefore, this report will explore ‘collaborative commissioning’: what it is and how it enables VCS organisations to work together to deliver services.

Commissioning is easily confused with procurement, i.e. the obtaining of goods and services. However, it is helpful to think of commissioning as a process “in the round,” of which procurement may be a part should there be sufficient need.

For Southwark Council, the commissioning process typically involves these stages:

1. **Analyse:** review relevant data, available resources, legislative requirements, and local priorities through a needs assessment.
2. **Plan:** review the information available and suggest solutions, which may or may not be outsourced, then establish Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and coming up with a plan to deliver.
3. **Do:** deciding on a type of service and putting it into practice.
4. **Review:** monitor what is working and what can be improved and revise accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

This process is sometimes referred to as **The Commissioning Cycle**<sup>3</sup>, which can be broken down to include more detailed steps:



<sup>1</sup> [Understanding commissioning: A practical guide for the culture and sport sector](#) (2011). Local Government Association, Department of Culture and Sport. Page 6.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Southwark Council staff (2024).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Page 7.

However, these stages are often followed in a non-linear manner. For example, the ‘analysis’ or ‘plan’ stage may be reintroduced into the process to correct course, should there be any issues in the ‘Do’ stage.

A commissioning process often leads to procurement, from which a contract is agreed upon between statutory organisations and the service provider selected. Grants are distinct from contracts as they are not considered to be service provision and, therefore, VAT and certain legal regulations do not apply.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, grants typically require less oversight than contracts and they are not considered examples of a commissioned project. In contrast, contracts are legally binding and require Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). There tend to be more monitoring requirements and legislation and procurement rules apply.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, voluntary and community organisations are more often the recipients of grants, as opposed to contracts. However, larger organisations, such as businesses and established charities, tend to receive contracts as they have more capacity to assess legal risk and engage in lengthy tendering processes. This does not mean VCS organisations should be transformed into larger, professionalised organisations. Not all groups want or need to expand. For such groups – and as will be explained in this report – collaboration in commissioning enables smaller VCS organisations to participate in and benefit from commissioning while allowing them to retain their purpose, scope and scale.

In 2022-23, 84% of Southwark Council’s community investment was distributed through contracts, as opposed to grants.<sup>6</sup> This is an increase from, for example, 2016-17 where 80% of Southwark Council’s community investment went to contracts.<sup>7</sup> Such shifts have contributed to a perception that more funding is being awarded through contracts than grants, effectively freezing out VCS organisations from pots of community investment. From interviews conducted with council officials for this research, there are concerns for service delivery. Specifically, when commissioned projects do not tap into the grassroots connections VCS organisations have with the local community.<sup>8</sup> This risks losing local knowledge and innovation.<sup>9</sup>

This provides important context for commissioning and is driven, in part, by austerity. As one council official notes, “There was a reduction in the number of commissioners, so it became harder to manage relationships with lots of small providers.”<sup>10</sup>

Before outlining features and examples of collaborative commissioning, this report will first explore some of the issues in commissioning in relation to VCS participation:

---

<sup>4</sup> [Developments in Governance Duties for Directors of Companies: Grants vs. Contracts](#) (2013). Russell Cooke.

<sup>5</sup> [Commissioning Framework](#) (2011). Voluntary Action Islington. Page 5.

<sup>6</sup> [Council VCS Funding 2022 to 2023](#) (2023). Southwark Council.

<sup>7</sup> [Community Investment Review: Research for the London Borough of Southwark](#) (2021). Rocket Science. Page 26.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Southwark Council staff (2024).

<sup>9</sup> [Grants to Commissioning: Online Consultation Findings](#) (2015). The Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames. Page 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid



## 3. Issues affecting VCS organisations

### Issue 1: tendering processes

Tendering is the process by which a statutory organisation advertises a contract for a service for which external organisations can apply. Once a tender is submitted, it can take months to hear a response. One larger VCS organisation, which has previously received a contract from the council, notes that, even when there is an existing relationship between service provider and commissioner, “we’re now in July and nothing’s been done,” having begun the tendering process for a contract months ago.<sup>11</sup>

The processes are time-consuming for organisations with less capacity. Before the signing of the contract, a tender typically involves:

- Submitting an expression of interest
- A pre-qualification questionnaire, which determines the suitability of an organisation for a commissioned project
- An invitation to tender, which determines the proposed methodology for service delivery and an outline of costs
- An interview and presentation
- Negotiations<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the deadlines to submit a tender are often short.<sup>13</sup> With no guarantee of receiving a contract at the end of it, tendering processes can stretch the capacity of smaller VCS organisations or repel such groups from engaging at all.

It is also true that tendering processes are more challenging because commissioned projects, like the needs of the residents they are trying to meet, are more complex. Similarly, if an organisation is unable to meet a tender deadline, are they best suited to take the challenge of a commissioned deadline? This reinforces the importance of collaboration in commissioning (see chapter 4), as providers of different sizes and specialisms can bid together and therefore lower the burden of tendering on each individual organisation.

### Issue 2: commissioning with the same providers, at the expense of sharing opportunities with the VCS

Commissioners are more likely to accept bids from groups with which they have a pre-existing relationship.<sup>14</sup> Year-on-year reductions to local council budgets, driven by austerity, make statutory organisations risk-averse. If an existing service provider is trusted and has a history of delivering on its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), commissioners may find it easier to contract them instead of innovating new projects with the VCS. As noted, it requires fewer commissioners to manage a single provider, as opposed to a consortium of smaller providers. Likewise, onboarding a new provider takes time, personnel, and funding.

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview with 1<sup>st</sup> Place staff (2024).

<sup>12</sup> [An Introduction to Commissioning and Tendering](#). The ACEVO Commissioning Support Service. Pages 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> [A framework for addressing practical barriers to integration of VCSE organisations in integrated care systems](#) (2023). NHS England.

<sup>14</sup> [An Introduction to Commissioning and Tendering](#). The ACEVO Commissioning Support Service. Pages 3.

However, a benefit of commissioning with smaller VCS organisations is that it improves relationships between communities and statutory organisations; likewise, contracting smaller VCS organisations helps them develop into larger ones, ensuring greater social benefit to communities over time.

### Issue 3: technical jargon used by commissioners

Commissioning has legal, business, and financial considerations. The jargon and acronyms used by commissioners in tendering processes reflect these complexities.<sup>15</sup> 'PQQs' (Pre-Qualification Questionnaires), 'ITTs' (Invitations to Tender), or LSPs (Local Strategic Partnerships) are examples of this. Other terms such as 'Market Warming' have a similar effect. They are a shorthand for a multifaceted process, which is time-consuming to explain in plain English.

Some terms require context. For example, 'Social Value.' While it may appear straightforward, for VCS organisations – which exist to drive social value, broadly understood - it is confusing. This is unless such questions are accompanied by a brief explanation of The Social Value Act (2013) which stipulates that a minimum of 10% weighting should be applied to social value in the assessment criteria for tenders and that examples of social value can be wide-ranging.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, asking VCS organisations to demonstrate 'Social Value' seems no more necessary than asking them whether they exist at all. Using jargon and acronyms without proper context reinforces the view that commissioned projects are for large professionalised organisations, not the VCS.

### Issue 4: Contracting requirements placing a high-level of burden on VCS organisations

Unlike grants, contracts are legally binding. A contract typically brings set targets and outputs; failure to meet these can be deemed a breach of contract.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, a combination of greater legal risk and onerous monitoring and evaluation requirements deter smaller VCS organisations from bidding for a tender.

A local charity director notes that some VCS groups “don't want to get involved monitoring or the safeguarding element” of commissioned work.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say the VCS disregards the importance of monitoring or safeguarding but that, without sufficient support, these areas appear complicated, risky and time-consuming. A lack of support from commissioners reflects the funding landscape, as one interviewee notes, “They're just having to react to the reactive environment that central government funding brings.”<sup>19</sup> A council that is 'firefighting' has less capacity to help VCS organisations become 'commissioning ready.'

### Issue 5: safeguarding

The previous point comes with one important caveat: addressing issues in commissioning should not come at the expense of safeguarding. One council official notes, “Having worked for charities with young people, I feel there is no burden too big when it comes to safeguarding. When it comes to children and vulnerable adults, we have to be risk averse.” The following section of the report

<sup>15</sup> [A beginner's guide to commissioning](#) (2011). John Dawson (NAVCA). Page 2.

<sup>16</sup> [Social Value Act: information and resources](#) (2021). Cabinet Office, GOV.UK.

<sup>17</sup> [Commissioning for outcomes and co-production](#) (2014). New Economics Foundation. Page 12.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with director of local children and parent support organisation (2024).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

will outline how an increased level of collaboration in commissioning can address issues 1-4. However, collaborative commissioning does not mean innovation at the expense of safeguarding for projects working with young, older and/or vulnerable people.

## 4. Collaborative commissioning

At the core of these issues is a lack of capacity among VCS organisations to: engage in complex tendering processes on short deadlines; navigate complex legal regulations, expressed using technical jargon; and fulfil all contracting requirements. These factors often result in statutory organisations selecting a familiar and/or larger organisation at the expense of utilising the skills and resources in the VCS.

To address these challenges, VCS organisations require additional time and personnel with relevant experience. One method to do this is through collaborative commissioning. In practice, this means creating a consortium of service providers that can pool together resources to bid and, if successful, fulfil contract requirements.

Lambeth-based charity High Trees has had success with this model with [Building Young Brixton](#) (BYB), a youth-led project to help the development of young people through educational activities, sports and play, mentoring, and employment support, among other activities. This partnership is funded by multiple sources (Lambeth Council, London Youth, Mayor of London, TNL Community Fund, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and City Bridge Trust) and involves ten groups (High Trees Community Development Trust, The Baytree Centre, Big Kid Foundation, Ebony Horse Club, Grove Adventure Playground, Indoamerican Refugee & Migrant Organisation (IRMO), Juvenis, Marcus Lipton Community Enterprise (MLCE), Spiral Skills and Step Now). Having worked with over 2500 young people, BYB has made progress towards its goals of bringing an:

- Increase in school involvement
- Increase in community involvement
- Increase in employability & employment
- Improvement in personal relationships
- Increase in emotional and physical wellbeing

Grace notes that the consortium model is “inconvenient but it’s fantastic...you're being asked to work outside of your comfort zone...you're having to think about bigger, bigger work, the bigger systems you're trying to change for young people.”<sup>20</sup>

Cornwall Voluntary Sector Forum has succeeded in using a similar model for [People in Mind](#). This service brought together eleven partners to support mental health in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. This partnership has a five-year contract and was jointly commissioned by the local ICB and Public Health. Within a year, there were over one thousand referrals, seventeen new peer support groups, and 81% of people said their wellbeing improved. According to Emma Rowse (CEO, Cornwall VSF), establishing good relationships is most important to improving service delivery. This means spending time co-designing services upfront and carefully managing the budget. Likewise, defining outcomes in advance – rather than prescribing activities – has given partners

---

<sup>20</sup> Interview with High Trees staff (2024)

flexibility. She notes that, in collaborative commissioning, “Go where the energy is. You’ll have your list of who the ‘right people’ are but go find the actual right people.”<sup>21</sup>

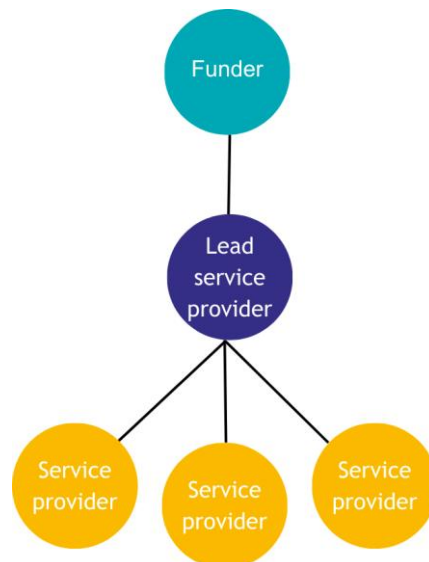
Despite the success of Building Young Brixton and People in Mind, the emergence of consultancy organisations – without the same grassroots connection to service users, but keen to pick up funding – makes High Trees question the “longevity of that model.”<sup>22</sup> This reinforces the importance of highlighting the social benefits VCS organisations bring to commissioning, not simply the funding benefits commissioners can bring to VCS organisations. As one government official said, the VCS can “respond more quickly and effectively to changing needs.”<sup>23</sup>

There are several features of a consortium model required to help ensure it works effectively:

## A lead provider

Typically, a consortium will have a lead provider, i.e. a point of contact to help manage the relationship between the commissioner and other service providers. They are also likely to have experience with monitoring and evaluation.

A visual representation of this model:



The consortium model does pose challenges for the lead provider. One participant in [COPSINS](#)’ Ageing Well project, a Southwark-based service model with Age UK as the lead provider, notes, “There’s a bit of politics that enter into it when you’ve got one lead provider which doesn’t necessarily have the same authority as the commissioner...you’re the only point of contact for [other consortium organisations] and that puts a lot of pressure on your capacity.”<sup>24</sup> The next version of the COPSINS model will have individual contracts in place for each partner organisation, enabling each of them to communicate directly with the commissioner, thereby relieving pressure on the lead provider so that it can focus on service delivery.

<sup>21</sup> Emma Rowse, speaking at a NAVCA webinar (22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> [Third Sector Commissioning](#) (2007). House of Commons: Public Administration Select Committee. Page 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid



## Co-design

Co-design is a term that is sometimes overused by statutory organisations. In some projects, commissioners will intend to work with groups to design the project but participating organisations may feel that their contributions are disregarded without adequate explanation. Genuine co-design takes time and personnel to manage relationships with community organisations.

There are successful examples of projects with co-design at the centre. Grace English, co-CEO of High Trees, says, “We've got a young person steering group, so they actually identify where there are needs.” A democratic method of working together ensures buy-in from all partners, helping form strong relationships from which the project can succeed.

Competitive dialogue has increasingly been adopted by commissioners to facilitate co-design in procurement processes. Formally introduced in 2006, competitive dialogue “refers to the discussion between the department and bidder to discuss any aspect of the procurement, e.g. the service requirements or proposed solution,” according to government guidance notes, which states the process allows “solutions to evolve.”<sup>2526</sup> This approach has been used by recently in steering groups for Southwark Council projects.

From the perspective of VCS organisations, there are likely to be concerns regarding remuneration for their time and contributions to the design of the project, particularly in cases where their bid is rejected. One community leader notes that, in a previous project of this kind, one individual was left feeling “angry about effectively having their ideas stolen and being left out [of the project].”<sup>27</sup>

These concerns can be addressed through remuneration. This means ensuring VCS groups are paid fairly for their time and given due credit, even if they do not become delivery partners on the project. If this is the case, competitive dialogue does provide a way for VCS organisations to use their understanding of the local community to shape the initiatives of statutory organizations.

## Longer contracts

Collaborative commissioning typically requires longer contracts. Alex Towers supported Sutton Together, a commissioned project given to one lead (Community Action Sutton) and six delivery partners to deliver services concerning young people, domestic abuse, health and wellbeing, and community development.<sup>28</sup> It has a five-year contract with the option of a two-year extension. He notes that longer contracts provide “financial stability to enable innovation and change over the life of the contract.”<sup>29</sup> This security also means that participating organisations have time to overcome setbacks that, for projects with shorter contracts, would result in commissioners losing confidence in their ability to deliver services.

There is a risk with this approach, as it may prevent new providers from accessing funding. This can be mitigated by building flexibility into the contract. A council official notes, “If we were to go with a longer contract model, there would need to be some scope for there to be changes to

---

<sup>25</sup> [Understanding commissioning behaviours: Commissioning and competition in the public sector](#) (2011). PWC. Page 4.

<sup>26</sup> [Competitive Dialogue and Competitive Procedure with Negotiation: Guidance note](#) (2021). Government Commercial Function. Page 4

<sup>27</sup> Southwark Voice meeting (October 2024).

<sup>28</sup> [Sutton Together](#) (2024). Community Action Sutton.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with former Sutton Council staff (2024).

contract delivery within that timeframe.”<sup>30</sup> This would allow the project to adapt to technological changes and the changing needs of service-users. There is also the option of terminating a contract early if issues persist. However, to ensure that providers benefit from the security of a longer contract, this should be considered a last resort.

## 5. Recommendations

Collaborative commissioning brings challenges for statutory organisations. For example, due diligence means credit checks are routinely performed to ensure potential providers are financial solvent. If a potential provider is registered with Companies House, these checks are straightforward. If not, due diligence can become resource intensive. Therefore, the recommendations below would not overhaul existing practices but rather create a basis from which more collaborative projects can be tested.

### Recommendation 1: review decision-making processes in statutory organisations

Not all commissioning projects are suited to VCS involvement, e.g. construction. For other projects, statutory organisations can introduce an additional step early in the commissioning cycle: a decision on whether the project in question could be delivered by a consortium and, in doing so, assessing the practicalities and benefits a collaborative model could bring. For projects where commissioners do opt for a collaborative model, the lead provider role needs to be clearly defined taking into account the capacity of the organisation taking on this responsibility. They also need remunerating for additional workload.

This will ensure that collaborative commissioning is at least considered by decision-makers. In doing this, increased VCS involvement – bringing local knowledge and innovation – becomes more likely, as the responsibility for making consortium-based projects happen is shared more equally between commissioners and VCS organisations.

### Recommendation 2: a needs assessment on extending tender deadlines

The Procurement Act 2023 will come into effect in 2025. Section 54 outlines minimum time limits for tenders for different circumstances, e.g. 30 days where “tenders may not be submitted electronically, but the tender notice and associated tender documents are all provided at the same time.” This legislation also stipulates that time limits need to take into account “the nature and complexity of the contract being awarded” and “the need for site visits, physical inspections and other practical steps,” among other considerations.<sup>31</sup> There will also be a Procurement Review Unit (PRU) to oversee and investigate adherence to the Procurement Act.<sup>32</sup>

This legislation is not guaranteed to solve the problem of short deadlines for VCS organisations specifically. However, it may help commissioners become more mindful of how the issue of short deadlines affects organisations with less capacity.

---

<sup>30</sup> Email with Southwark Council staff (2024).

<sup>31</sup> [Procurement Act 2023](#). Legislation.gov.uk.

<sup>32</sup> [Raising standards: our ambition](#) (2024). Government Commercial Function.

To ensure a level playing field, commissioners should undertake needs assessments of their local VCS. This means reaching out directly to the VCS and recording their responses. The findings of a needs assessment will then inform the design of tenders. This process will help them understand what a suitable deadline looks like for VCS organisations interested in bidding for a tender. It would also inform how they publicise tenders, ensuring they reach VCS organisations that would be well-suited to a particular project. From there, commissioners can use their findings to update tendering policies, effectively building on section 54 of the Procurement Act in internal processes.

## Recommendation 3: improving tenders by using plain English

Ideally, tenders would be published in different languages that reflect the diversity of the local area. However, some statutory organisations and funders may not have the resources to do this effectively. If this is not possible, it is essential for VCS organisations that tenders are written in plain English, where possible avoiding legalistic jargon or at least explaining such terms simply. This reinforces the [Southwark Stands Together](#) report, in which the council commits to “[de-formalising] the language of services,” as part of their efforts to address structural racism.<sup>33</sup>

Informed by the Localism Act 2011 and the Social Value Act 2013 (see page 4), Sutton Council put forward its [Added Social Value Strategy 2020](#). The first iteration of this strategy was criticised. According to Alex Towers, a former Sutton Council official, “It was too academic to actually practically make a difference in the awarding of contracts.”<sup>34</sup>

From there, Alex reviewed the legislation to explain its importance to Sutton Council’s strategy using simple, widely understood imagery: “In practical terms, it’s easier to think of added social value as if you’re baking a cake. Sometimes, added social value is the ‘icing on the top’: It’s the added extra that a provider offers that makes their proposal, or cake, even better. Alternatively, added social value is the special ingredient put ‘into the mix’ to change the actual cake.”<sup>35</sup>

Using ‘plain English’ may sound like a straightforward fix. In practice, this means circulating copy for commissioning documents for multiple rounds of feedback, and revising the text until there is confidence all potential readers will understand it.

## Recommendation 4: training groups to become ‘commissioning ready’

There are some contracts for which smaller VCS organisations are unsuited. For example, where such groups do not have the appropriate accreditation in areas like debt advice.<sup>36</sup> For other tenders, it is possible to provide training sessions and one-to-one mentoring to help groups become ‘commissioning ready.’ This support would help groups understand and navigate:

- Legal regulations
- Financial risks, e.g. fraud, and how to mitigate against this
- Forming a strategy to deliver a service

<sup>33</sup> [Southwark Stands Together](#) (2021). Southwark Council. Page 8.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with former Sutton Council staff (2024).

<sup>35</sup> [Added Social Value Strategy 2020](#) (2020). Sutton Council. Page 3.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Southwark Council staff (2024).

- Using digital portals, e.g. for sharing data.<sup>37 38</sup>

One way to deliver this training would be to fund a specialised programme. Umbrella organisations, of which Community Southwark is one, would be well-placed to train VCS organisations. In a consortium model, the lead provider could help groups navigate the complexities of contracts or, if there are no concerns about a conflict of interest, the commissioning body itself. In all cases, training would require a budget and a dedicated project manager, as opposed to attaching new responsibilities to an existing role.

Alternatively, the co-production of a commissioned project may help groups become accustomed to not only understanding the needs that exist in the community but also the risks and challenges of commissioning. This would help reframe the VCS's involvement in service delivery from being a 'provider' to a 'partner.' However, this presents a different challenge: would co-production be embedded into the commissioning cycle, or would it be a similar process that pays lip-service to the idea of co-production?

One such example of collaboration in the sector is the Bradford District and Craven Health and Care Partnership: a network of wellbeing hubs providing support on issues ranging from welfare benefits, mental wellbeing, and domestic abuse. The partnership includes individuals from local authorities, the NHS, the care sector, and the VCS, among others. The basis of this partnership are shared values articulated through an agreement that emphasises collective decision making (including co-production and retraining), viewing collaborators as partners, and to "Act as One."<sup>39</sup> From May 2022 to January 2024, its services have supported 6356 individuals and could serve as template for other areas to help their VCS become 'commissioning ready.'<sup>40</sup>

## Recommendation 5: a mental health consortium

A core objective of Community Southwark is to support "a collaborative VCS able to influence change." Taking on board the conclusions of this report, Community Southwark will look to support its Mental Health Network to develop a consortium of local VCS organisations specialising in mental health.

Southwark Council's [JSNA report](#) notes, "Local survey results for 2023 suggest that 17% Southwark adults have a mental health condition which has lasted longer than 12 months." Severe health inequalities between different racial and ethnic groups also underscore the need for additional support and signposting. The same report notes that "almost 4 in 10 (39%) severe mental illness patients are from Black ethnic backgrounds, compared with 1 in 4 (25.5%) of all Southwark GP patients."<sup>41</sup>

This project is in an early stage but VCS organisations promoting mental health benefits have already expressed interest in leading or taking part in the consortium. Community Southwark will support the administration and fundraising of this network.

<sup>37</sup> [Procurement Risks and Ways to Mitigate Them](#) (2023). Precoro.

<sup>38</sup> On digital platforms, the Procurement Act 2023 will establish a Central Digital Platform where suppliers can upload data. In the long term, this may make tendering simpler for VCS organisations, as this platform will replace the variety of digital portals currently used. However, it is another example of a tool for which VCS groups will require training.

<sup>39</sup> Strategic Partnering Agreement (2023). Bradford District and Craven Health and Care Partnership. Page 47.

<sup>40</sup> Slides shared at 'Embedding VCSE' NAVCA Webinar (2024).

<sup>41</sup> [JSNA Annual Report](#) (2024). Southwark Council. Page 54-56.

## 6. Conclusion

It became clear through this research process that, from London to Cornwall to Bradford, some commissioners have successfully adapted and innovated their tendering processes in some cases.

The next step is to ensure that commissioners embed this into their day-to-day processes for projects suited to VCS involvement. This means:

1. Reviewing decision-making processes in statutory organisations with a view to introducing an additional step early in the commissioning cycle: a decision on whether the project in question could be delivered by a consortium. This could help statutory organisations adopt a consortium model more regularly, with co-design of services embedded in the project from the start.
2. Conducting a needs assessment of the VCS, to ensure tender deadlines consider the limited capacity of VCS organisations. This means reaching out to the VCS directly.
3. Using plain English when publishing tenders.
4. Helping groups to become 'commissioning ready,' by funding training programmes and embedding training into the co-design of projects using a consortium model.
5. Address Southwark's mental health challenges by supporting a consortium of mental health providers to bid for funding.

These recommendations do not guarantee that commissioners will access all benefits of greater VCS involvement. Nor will they ensure the VCS will feel recognised and valued to the extent that they should. However, for Southwark Council, these recommendations may help the Council make good on its goal of "continued collaboration to further inform action planning," outlined in *Southwark Stands Together*.<sup>42</sup>

They also provide a foundation from which statutory organisations can more easily uphold the six principles outlined in the [State of Sector report](#):

1. Communicate clearly, honestly. Talk with us, not at us. Come to the VCS, don't expect it to come to you. Use Plain English, visual imagery, and short documents. Give proper notice of meetings, events, and consultations.
2. Respect regular contributors and reach out to groups you don't already know, especially smaller historically under-represented ones.
3. Always feed back, even when you don't have any progress to report.
4. Respect and pay for VCS time and expertise. Understand the VCS does not always operate during 'working hours'.
5. Don't assume you know best – VCS organisations are embedded in local communities and often more trusted by them. Engage the VCS in decision making. And if you say you're going to make decisions with the VCS, be sure that is what you intend to do and be prepared to let go of power to do so.
6. Celebrate the VCS and allow it to be critical without using your power and money to make that uncomfortable.

---

<sup>42</sup> [Southwark Stands Together](#) (2021). Southwark Council. Page 6.