SPECIAL ISSUE ON ARTS AND JUSTICE
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WE ARE experiencing public service reform of unprecedented pace and scope in Scotland. Leaders of public services are having to manage a perfect storm of tightening budgets, reform and increased demand while building and maintaining public confidence. Such an environment tests and challenges all of us to be more creative and collaborative, perhaps more than we have ever been before, particularly with communities, people who use services and with voluntary or ‘third sector’ organisations in particular.

In keeping with Scotland’s reputation for innovation in public services, this is very much where PSPs come in.

So, what are Public Social Partnerships?

PSPs are ‘a strategic partnering arrangement which involves the third sector earlier and more deeply in the design and commissioning of public services’ (Scottish Government 2011).

This puts third sector organisations at the heart of service design and delivery. In criminal justice, the Scottish Government’s Reducing Reoffending Change Fund has set up six justice PSPs representing an investment of £7.7 m to 2014/2015, with a focus on women and prolific offenders (Mairs and Tolland, 2013). There is also a separate PSP, based at HMP Low Moss focusing on supporting prisoners on release (below).

The advantages of third sector involvement

Public sector leaders realise that, for Scotland to succeed, we need to build an appreciation of the key contribution that the third sector can make to public services, not just in terms of innovation but also in terms of the better understanding of service user needs.

The third sector can often reach where the state and the market cannot and while it is early days, I am confident that PSPs will demonstrate this and the added value of cross sector strategic collaboration in justice terms. There are challenges, not least the short term funding (Downie, 2013)

In reality, there are limited workable alternatives to PSPs in the Scottish context. The question is not if we should engage the third sector in the design and delivery of public services but how we do so. If we fail to find a meaningful mechanism for local partnerships in particular, we can either take the logical step back towards public sector protectionism, running counter to the recommendations of the Christie Commission (2011) or we take the logical step forward towards market creation and a payment by results model for public services. I would argue that there is a distinct lack of appetite for either of these scenarios in Scotland.

Example: Low Moss Prisoner Support Pathway

For an example of how a PSP has been making a difference, consider Turning Point Scotland’s provision of staff to help prisoners around release from HMP Low Moss. TPS chief executive Martin Cawley, says that it brings “together skills and expertise among public agencies and the voluntary sector in partnership. People leaving prison often have nowhere to live, a lack of income to buy food or pay bills, or have mental health and substance misuse issues they need to address. Staff will support people leaving prison in order to help access community resources which will greatly improve their chances of being able to make a fresh start.”

Already staff report that “It’s a huge eye opener. The [prison] staff who have been out now understand why a lot of people come back into prison, because for some people, life in prison is actually a hundred times better than outside” (Low Moss PSP, 2013).

Scotland, like most Western democracies, is alert to the need to mitigate the impact of cuts. I am excited by the possibilities that PSPs offer for the future in the search for a mechanism which enables meaningful engagement with the third sector in the design and delivery of public services at local and national levels. As an alternative to market creation for public services, other countries just might be interested in what we are doing.


Rob Strachan is chief officer of Lothian and Borders Community Justice Authority.
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