A FAIR DEAL FOR OUR COMMUNITY SERVICES

In NSW there are over 1500 not for profit community sector organisations, delivering vital services to the most disadvantaged people in our community.

NCOSS has started a conversation with communities and NCOSS members across the State. We have heard about what principles you think the Government should adopt to ensure we build a stronger partnership between government and our sector, and that we have fair and reasonable reform and procurement processes.

NCOSS has visited over 20 different cities, suburbs and towns across NSW and spoken to over 250 representatives from social and community services.

This is what we've heard...

Reform and change: What principles should underpin the development and implementation of reform and change of programs and policies that affect the delivery of services by the community sector in New South Wales?

- Learn from previous and current reform processes eg Disability funding – transition to NDIS is problematic – NSW government appears to be exiting the space, leaving a lot of advocacy and other services up in the air; "Health reform – as opposed to GHSH – is taking forever, dragging out"
- Look at the learnings from GHSH
- Use a rights based approach to development and service delivery should be at the forefront of all of programs and policies. The reform should be based on the needs and aspirations of the very individuals it affects. There is concern regarding broader funding reforms in NSW and implications this may have on smaller services.
- Explain why reform/change is necessary
- Clearly outline and communicate problems and areas needing reform
- Protect relationships that have been built up between organisations " Don't throw collaboration out with bath water"
- Ensure an equitable distribution of resources across the state taking into account differing costs of provision due to isolation/distance

- Put money towards changing the structure, culture of the sector and take into account the financial implications of change (ERO, due diligence, skilling up lead organisations)
- Lead up to tenders need to include an education process to assist organisations to identify gaps in services available within the community as well as issues within services
- Provide 12 months notice when funding processes are changing.

Policy, program and project design: What is the best way to design policies, programs and projects? What role should our sector play in this process?

- Policy needs to be based on long term outcomes for the community and the sector where funding addresses root causes and progress/continue momentum in existing projects rather than be reactive to issues
- Policy and programs need to take into account what is happening in the Federal sphere
- Develop a consistent framework that exists across the different funding agencies
- Program development needs to be based on recent data/statistics where regional analysis accounts for anomalies (ie needs of Bankstown unlikely to align with Moss Vale but are in the same region)
- Build on existing infrastructure eg hubs, etc
- Program parameters need to be flexible and allow for innovation
- Programs consider the need for coordination with other programs to ensure connections are in place for clients
- Provide principles around the development of "one-stop-shops"
- Include gender equality principles
- Programs should be evaluated before being putting out to tender again. Identify effective programs prior to the process beginning particularly if using "preferred tender arrangements" and have the hard conversations with organisations early on
- Ideal funding will take into account the needs of the whole community. Early intervention appears to be primarily focussed on children – communities are made up of more than just children
- Funding needs to be realistic – "limited funding and boundless expectations"
- Ensure an adequate timeframe – take the time to do it properly, DSS and GHSH are examples of this not being done.
- Timeframes for government need to equate with those for the Sector. Expectations of the sector to respond to government processes need to be equitable ie it is unreasonable to establish a timeframe where time periods allocated to the sector are reduced because of time required to complete government processes.
- Ensure sector representatives are at the table from the outset – true co-design
- Communities need to be involved in discussions for their area.

What is the best way for government to go about funding and "purchasing" services delivered by our sector?

- Competitive tendering
    - Focus needs to be on both people and service delivery. Competitive tendering can shift focus away to service delivery alone
    - Tender processes will ideally value local knowledge and services that can show an effective track record. Local services with a track record are not succeeding – the tender processes need to value work that has already been done, not just what's being suggested for the future. The focus appears to have moved from who is doing the best work to who can lobby the best, get media coverage etc
    - Build in equitable timeframes to prepare tenders – smaller organisations have more demands on resources to participate in this process
    - Include a weighting system for accountability
    - Include an interview process – where the process is not dependant on what is said in the written document
    - Keep the document succinct – the tender should include the right 5-6 questions (and no more) and require a budget
    - If the process is to be online, ensure it operates effectively with no bugs or connectivity issues
    - Provide support or training for organisation who cannot afford/access a tender writer – don't tender away the diversity of the sector , there needs to be a range of service sizes and types
    - No pre-tenders – don't drain limited resources if the organisation has no hope of being considered
- Area Assistance Scheme may provide an alternative model to competitive tendering
- Provide a glossary of terms to provide clarity and ensure they are used appropriately. Do not allow them to interfere with a transparent process (eg "commercial in confidence" can cut through collaboration). "Conflict of interest" needs to be unpacked as it can be used to destroy "synergy of interests"
- Funding
    - Funding needs to be stable and reliable – the current insecurity in some programs is affecting the ability to plan ahead and retain good people
    - Need 5 year funding that is indexed against CPI covering the true cost of services eg:
        - Staff development costs and supports appropriate wages
        - Realistic transport costs for clients and staff
        - Management and evaluation processes
        - Quality assurance programs
        - Market rents (where applicable)
        - Compliance costs eg accreditation
    - Include funding for transition processes where required

- o Provide resources and support for organisations to fund mergers/partnerships, etc
- Allow increased flexibility with operating costs if the organisation has a proven track record
- Provide fair/reasonable amount of time to prepare applications, tenders, etc.

Contracts: What does a fair contract look like? What clauses are included in our contracts with government funders that are unfair?

- Move away from one-size fits all
- Proportionality in contracts that take into account the organisation size, value of the contract, etc
- Standardised contracts (ie across government agencies) that take into account differences between organisations and differences between deliverables
- Standardisation of the issuing of contracts, the longevity of contracts, etc
- No gag clauses
- Less prescriptive to allow for greater collaboration and negotiation between parties
- Allow retention of service generated income and a percentage of their surplus if it is
- the result of good practice
- Clarify government rationale for clauses in contracts
- Timeframes for signing off on contracts need to allow for organisations to access legal advice
- If the service can be shown to not be meeting the contractual requirements and/or meeting community obligations, the contract should be terminated. A service should leave a community better off after working with them.

Red tape, compliance and regulation: How does red tape prevent us from delivering quality services to the people and communities we work with? What would make it better?

- Grants are becoming smaller and more piecemeal, this means organisations are juggling a lot of balls and dealing with a lot of reporting as opposed to the requirements where there are larger chunks of funding
- "I find a number of workers are caught behind their desks meeting compliance and regulation frameworks. I have found this has meant limited involvement from a number of services in key strategic projects on broader issues and even involvement in partnerships."
- Risk appears to be being passed from Government to service providers
- "Reporting is silly– 4 quarterly reports on top of an Annual Report and they have to be different."
- "Accreditation for small organisations is super difficult and too like what would be necessary for large organisations. Small organisations spending money and time on paperwork, taking away from core business."

How should government and the sector engage to ensure we understand each other's needs, motivations and issues? How do we share information and data that will improve the quality of the services that we deliver?

- Communication needs to be two way – The Sector needs communication channels to provide feedback to Government on the effectiveness of reforms/programs
- Forums and events regarding reforms and new programs need to be coordinated – one organisation cannot attend multiple events in one region (ie Broken Hill – 20 government funded events in one week)
- Transitional periods – services need information on who has the funding to enable smooth handing over and better outcomes for clients
- When funding processes are changing – require adequate information 12 months prior to the changes kicking in to allow for business planning
- Ensure government staff have the knowledge of the process and potential issues
- All documentation needs to have a glossary of terms, particularly terms frequently heard but have multiple meanings eg Hub, partnership, co-design, innovation, disadvantaged, etc
- Educate the sector to have the capacity to sell themselves i.e. use the right language, articulate, etc
- Toolkits would be helpful.
- "There have been limited engagement opportunities for the sector to get involved in at local levels. There are better processes and software programs (Patchwork Program) that can support information sharing. Any engagement needs to be meaningful for all parties, this has rarely occurred in NSW. The sector in my experience tends to be disconnected or doesn't have time to communicate effectively with the government and decision makers. Their priority is meeting the need of the community members walking off the street. Maybe the time to engage and communicate is caught up with red tape, compliance and regulation."

Other issues

- Regional/local responses
  - Utilise local knowledge
  - Provide support for local services and regional solutions
  - Value local Hubs and networks that organisations have set up that are already trusted – "if you don't have trust, you don't have a service"
  - Triage model – support networked approach with coordinated and integrated services
- Mainstreaming of services is a problem
  - Need to retain services designed for specific communities e.g. Aboriginal people
- Recognition of differences between rural/regional services and metropolitan services

Over the next few weeks we will be back visiting many communities across the State seeking further input and talking next steps. We will then pull together your feedback for our NCOSS Sector Development Forum to finalise and will launch the guidelines at our AGM.

If you have input, want to get involved in the campaign, or want more info on when we are in your area contact us at fairdeal@ncoss.org.au