

Unlocking the Imagination

Rethinking Commissioning



SIMON DUFFY

Second Edition



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RETHINKING COMMISSIONING

Second Edition

by Simon Duffy

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About the author

Between 1990 and 1994 Simon Duffy led the development of a system of brokerage and individualised funding in Southwark. In 1996 he founded Inclusion Glasgow where he developed Individual Service Funds. In 2000 he began working with North Lanarkshire Council on the development of Self-Directed Support and Individual Budgets. Simon then led In Control from 2003 to 2009 and was involved in significant changes to social policy in England. In 2009 Simon established The Centre for Welfare Reform in order to help promote innovation and new thinking about the welfare state. Simon is also the author of the books *Keys to Citizenship* and *The Unmaking of Man*.

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ABOVE ALL, I THINK THE IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP SHOULD REMAIN AT THE CENTRE OF MODERN POLITICAL DEBATES ABOUT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS. THE CONCEPT OF A CITIZEN IS THAT OF A PERSON WHO CAN HOLD [THEIR] HEAD HIGH AND PARTICIPATE FULLY AND WITH DIGNITY IN THE LIFE OF [THEIR] SOCIETY.

[Jeremy Waldron](#)

IMAGINATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWLEDGE.

[Albert Einstein](#)

Acknowledgment

This book was written 14 years ago and there are now so many people to thank for their support or influence that it is impossible to do justice to everyone. But special thanks must be given to Peter Kinsella - who encouraged me to write the book; to Steven Rose - who made its publication possible; and to John O'Brien whose thinking inspired and underpins all the ideas in this book.

A note on terminology

I have used the term “people with learning difficulties,” the term preferred by the self-advocacy movement, in preference to the terms “people with a mental handicap” or “people with learning disabilities.” In some places I have simply referred to people with disabilities when that much wider group of people is implied (which is the preferred use outside the UK).

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Foreword to First Edition

This book is published at an important time. We are now well established in the changes that came about through the separation of purchasing and provision. Still relatively young, it has been interesting and pleasing to see the increasing sophistication of some purchasers around the country.

But let us not forget, that these are the same people who were around before the changes. We have merely organised ourselves in different ways. This does not excuse us from building upon the successful and beneficial elements of the system prior to 1993. We have built up a considerable bank of knowledge and learning over the last 20 years. However, our job is really only just beginning.

This important book from Simon Duffy highlights many of the key issues that are confronting purchasers, really, regardless of the field that they are in. It offers both useful strategies and considerable food for thought as we learn more about our new roles and responsibilities, and as we listen more to people with learning difficulties and recognise that their expectations are rising.

This book not only draws heavily on Simon's experiences in Southwark, but draws upon a wealth of learning from the National Development Team's work in many parts of the UK. Your imagination will be more than unlocked; the central theme of this book is empowering people with learning difficulties. If this is the only message that you take away from this, then it will have been well worth the read.

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Separating out purchasing and provision has only heightened our attention to developing services that people need and want. Many useful strategies for doing this are offered throughout this book. However, as there is neither a model for service provision that can be universally replicated, nor a universal model of purchasing, we need to recognise the unique nature of each of the communities that we work within. This uniqueness is going to require unique ways of working and organising in each of our own areas.

The opportunities that the recent Community Care changes presented us with need to be seized. We can only do this if we work in an equal partnership with people with learning difficulties and those who care most about them. Approach this book with an open mind. It will challenge many assumptions. It is not a technical guide, but a reflection on some of the most effective and innovative practices that have emerged over the last couple of years.

Peter Kinsella, 1996

National Development Team (NDT)

Foreword

Although first published in 1996 most of the simple messages conveyed by Simon Duffy in *Unlocking the Imagination* are as relevant today as they were almost two decades ago.

Much of commissioning remains locked in a bureaucratic planning cycle, many peoples' support is still delivered through the benevolent 'Professional Gift Model', many commissioners still struggle to promote the power of the individual; in the current financially challenging environment commissioners often fail to see the human and economic advantage of investing in communities and seldom manage to forge visions in partnership with people with learning difficulties.

The intervening years between the publication of the first edition of *Unlocking the Imagination* and this edition have seen the publication of two learning disability White Papers, the supposed closure of the last NHS institution in 2010 and then following various abuse scandals the realisation that more than 3000 people with a learning difficulty are now incarcerated in private hospitals and NHS assessment and treatment units.

Why do things remain so grim for so many people with learning difficulties? Will things ever get better or are significant numbers of people with learning difficulties destined to have their human rights denied and abused on a daily basis.

I was privileged to work with Simon at Choice Support (then Southwark Consortium) in the early 1990s. I witnessed first-hand Simon's early work which informed *Unlocking the Imagination* and later Simon's following publication *Keys to Citizenship* (Duffy, 2003 and 2006). Through his early work at Choice Support which was developed further at Inclusion Glasgow, Simon proved beyond doubt that even people with the most complex support needs can be supported to achieve citizenship.

I recommend *Unlocking the Imagination* as essential reading for those who have serious aspirations of supporting people with learning difficulties to achieve citizenship; it offers some basic guiding principles and the potential to help speed up the journey to liberation and citizenship that too many people with learning difficulties have waited too long to embark upon.

Steven Rose, 2014

Chief Executive, Choice Support

Introduction (2014)

This book provides a different way of looking at people with learning difficulties and the welfare services that are supposed to serve them. The state and its services have tended to see people as its subjects - needy people - who need them. Instead this book proposes that we abandon this top-down perspective. Instead we must start with the person, think of them as a citizen, and see what kinds of supports and services are really helpful. It turns out that we still need a welfare state and many of the public services we've become used to - but we don't need many of the systems of power and control which have so damaged the lives of disabled people - particularly people with learning difficulties.

I wrote *Unlocking the Imagination* for the National Development Team (now NDTi) in 1995 after working with them for three years on the promotion of Supported Living. I was rather disappointed when the NDT decided that they did not want to publish it. However I was fortunate in my friends. Peter Kinsella, then still at the NDT lent me all the support he could, and Steven Rose of Choice Support agreed to help publish it through Choice Press. We printed 1,000 copies and they sold quickly. But by the time all of this had been done I was busy setting up Inclusion Glasgow and so I did not give the book much further thought.

A few years later, in 2003, I published *Keys to Citizenship* which took many of the same ideas within *Unlocking the Imagination*, but explored what they meant directly for people and families - rather than just for the rather peculiar audience of 'purchasers' at whom I'd targeted the earlier work. Time had taught me that there was no substitute for getting power and information directly to people.

I have now republished *Unlocking the Imagination*, 14 years later, for two reasons. Firstly because some of the ideas which were set out in this book - particularly the Professional Gift and Citizenship Models - seem to have taken on a life of their own. They are used by me, and also by a few others, but often people don't seem to know how to reference them correctly. So by publishing *Unlocking the Imagination* again I can at least anchor those ideas in their original context - which I think is of more than just academic interest.

Also, on re-reading *Unlocking the Imagination* 18 years later I am surprised by the relevance of some parts of it. Many terms that I am associated with are not used here - I do not talk about Individual Budgets, Self-Directed Support, Resource Allocation Systems or the Keys to Citizenship. But the seeds of all these ideas can all be found within this book. This may not be a good thing, it may show how slowly my own thinking evolves. But there are also many ideas that I developed and to which I have subsequently paid much less attention. Some ideas may not be worth any attention; but

I think my efforts to develop an empowering model of commissioning - instead of the technocratic approach which has been prevalent - is still of relevance today.

I decided to restrict any changes to minor amendments, the inclusion of my more recent colour graphics and the elimination of some excessive design complexities. I also changed the subtitle from 'strategies for purchasing services for people with learning difficulties' to 'rethinking commissioning'. The more grandiose term 'commissioning' has now replaced the more modest 'purchasing' and I think the analysis, while rooted in the experiences of people with learning difficulties, is more widely applicable.

I would stand by most of what is written here - although there are many things I might reframe, rebalance or rewrite. But I think it is better not to fiddle too much - you, the reader, are quite able to make up your own mind about these issues or to think about whether or not times have changed.

The purpose of commissioning (1996)

It is sometimes very easy for those of us who work in human services to lose sight of our real obligations and to end up spending time and energy pursuing matters which are of little help to those we are there to serve. The idea of 'purchasing' (or 'commissioning' as it is sometimes known) is one, which while potentially useful, can also be immensely confusing and distracting. The challenge is to find a useful way of understanding the idea of purchasing, a way which focuses our energy on the right things and does not distract us from our real obligations to people with learning difficulties.

One of the traps set by new ideas is that we can get lost in the new language and lose our grip on what we already knew. A sign of this confusion is when agencies or individuals, instead of defining themselves by what they are trying to achieve, slip into defining themselves by these new functional labels: 'purchaser' or 'provider'. Sometimes this distinction has only served to increase our confusion and decrease our ability to get to grips with the real challenges we face. In our anxiety to make sense of these new labels we can lose our grip on our real purpose.

We encounter this same phenomenon when we see services engaged in constant discussions about organisational boundaries: mergers, separations and joint purchasing. We encounter it when we see the level of paperwork go up (contracts, tenders, specifications, monitoring and quality standards) and the amount of real face-to-face contact go down. We also see it when services talk about economies of scale, units, beds and measurement of need and stop talking about real individuals. All these changes are the price we pay for seizing on this new terminology without really understanding it; but it does not have to be this way.

This book tries to offer a helpful way of understanding the purpose of purchasing. It aims to unlock our imaginations, and thereby open up new approaches to the delivery of services to people with learning difficulties. The first part of the book argues that our imaginations have been restricted by damaging assumptions about how human services have to be understood. It argues that we need to stop seeing people with learning difficulties as passive recipients of welfare but rather to see them as active citizens, full members of the community, who possess certain rights to extra support.

This means:

- We need to see each individual as a potentially powerful person with a life of their own to lead.
- We need to see the community as capable of offering people both support and opportunities for them to contribute to the community.
- We need to see professional agencies as enablers and supporters of the individual and their community.
- We need to see the individual with a disability as having the right to receive support and determine both what the support is and who actually provides it.

The second part of the book aims to encourage imaginative initiatives by describing some of the tactics and principles which are being used by some purchasers. These examples are offered not as a prescriptive guide to purchasing but as a means for reflection on a local basis.

Overall the book is informed by a strong sense that purchasing is really just a type of managing (that is, making things happen with and through people) and, whilst the term ‘purchasing’ may be suggestive of a certain style and discipline which is useful at the moment, it would seem best to keep an open mind as to what skills and strategies will be needed in the future, rather than limit ourselves by assuming we understand and know everything we need to today.

We cannot be satisfied with some simplistic and neat model of how things should be organised, nor should the idea of purchasing be treated with too much awe. Instead all organisations, whether purchasers or providers will need to continually ask themselves, and those they serve, whether the system of service delivery really is empowering the individual and enriching the community and whether the system is enabling people with learning difficulties to be full citizens.

For anyone who wants a simple ‘off-the-peg’ prescription about how to do purchasing this book will be a disappointment. I think any simple prescription would be foolish. Rather this book has been written in the spirit of Einstein’s belief that: *“Imagination is more important than knowledge”*. In other words, the key to solving complicated problems is not in collecting data but in finding the right way to think about the problem. This book is about trying to find the right way to think about the organisation of services for people with learning difficulties

Finally it is worth saying that clearly this book is not written in as accessible a style as it might have been and that this probably limits the book’s attractiveness to people with learning difficulties. I apologise for my failure to find a way, at the moment, to create an accessible version of this book. For anyone who has not read it already I would recommend People First’s book *Oi, It’s My Assessment!* which shares the same central thesis of this book.

The historical background

Although the terms purchaser and provider are now much in use a moment's thought reveals what a novel creature the purchaser is. The agencies who are normally described as purchasers are the Social Services Departments of local authorities, NHS District Health Authorities and Family Health Service Authorities and a group whose importance to people with learning difficulties is still uncertain, 'fund-holding' General Practitioners. However, being able to say which agencies are purchasers does not help us to understand what purchasing is.

The history of people with learning difficulties

To understand our present position we need to bring together two strands of British history. The first of these strands is the history of Britain's citizens with learning difficulties who, over the last two hundred years, have been engaged in a protracted fight to further their status and place in the mainstream of British life. At the beginning of the nineteenth century a programme of hospitalisation began. This programme was produced by a collection of social, economic, professional and political forces which sought to isolate and 'do away with the problem' of disability. People were congregated together in large hospitals, many miles away from their homes; they lacked any clear rights and led lives of, at best, benign cruelty, drudgery and passivity and at worst, rape, torture and death.

From a peak, in England alone, of 65,000 in 1968 the hospital population has been slowly dropping. At the heart of this change has been the slow awakening of the public, professionals and politicians to the horror of life in these institutions. It is as if the patently foolish fears that supported the process of institutionalisation have waned.

Moreover, for some, this movement away from the hospitalisation of people with learning difficulties has not just been informed by a sense of horror but also by a positive desire to move towards something which has become known as 'community integration'. Both official and unofficial social policy (Rose 1993) has emphasised the need to have a more inclusive society, with services which actively integrate people into their communities, and the need to recognise the valuable roles that people with learning difficulties can play within society.

In 1971 the White Paper, *Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped*, as a response to the hospital scandals of the late 1960s, seemed to herald a new era. On the surface there seemed to be a fundamental shift in thinking and attitude about people with learning difficulties. The rhetoric spoke of community services and better lives. Yet, for 10 years, there was instead a proliferation of large hostels and community units and the opening of more Adult Training Centres. While these services were smaller and more local than the hospitals they were meant to replace they seemed to repeat the same institutional regimes (and indeed philosophies) of the hospitals and institutions.

However, towards the beginning of the 1980s, many of our services, leading practitioners and thinkers were beginning to be heavily influenced by the philosophy of Normalisation and services like ENCOR in the United States. The King's Fund Centre played an important catalytic role with its promotion of the *Ordinary Life Initiative* (Towell, 1980). The focus was now put on people's rights to lead ordinary lives, lives that were the same as the rest of society, to live in ordinary houses, and to be full members of their local communities.

Now, in the 1990s, while many more people with learning difficulties are leading their own lives in the community, there are, at the very least, 11,000 people still living in hospital, in England alone. Moreover, many of those no longer living in hospital are still leading segregated and institutionalised lives, but now on a smaller scale. In fact, one might see the new challenge for people with learning difficulties as the need to overcome the restrictions imposed by 'community services', whether they be workshops, hostels, group homes or training centres.

One way of describing the recent history of people with learning difficulties is to think of it as the development of a deeper understanding of the true meaning of community integration.

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As such it is possible to identify three phases in this process:

- **Phase 1** - The closure of hospitals and other large segregated and congregated services, and the creation of facilities which are physically close to local communities. Community integration is understood as moving people "back to their communities," allowing them to live closer to their family or the geographical area they were brought up in.
- **Phase 2** - The removal of the stigmas of disability, the use of generic services and the development of specialist facilities which look as "ordinary as possible". Community integration is understood as helping people to 'fit' into their communities, so that they do not stand out or receive any negative attention from the wider community.
- **Phase 3** - The empowerment of individuals to take control of their own lives and play active, fulfilling roles within the community, building upon the capacities of individuals and communities. Community integration is understood as the creation of opportunities for individuals to become active members of the community and to develop their own network of family, friends, colleagues and fellow citizens.

Finally, while the idea of community integration remains a powerful source of inspiration to many it is also important to remember that the most common social understanding of people with learning difficulties is still as objects of charity or pity.

So, while for many of us, the idea of achieving equal rights for people with learning difficulties has become a central objective, the challenge for us is to show that this idea can be reconciled with the idea that people have needs which give them an entitlement to the resources of the community.

The history of human services

This brings us to the second historical thread: the development of human services for people with learning difficulties. This second strand has not been intimately connected to the first. While there have been a number of national policy initiatives to change the services offered to people with learning difficulties, these have not informed, in any profound way, national thinking about the whole structure and management of human service organisations.

Since the creation of the NHS in 1948 and the development of Social Service Departments within local authorities in the 1970s these services have undergone a series of vertical and horizontal reorganisations. Vertical reorganisations are changes in hierarchy: the creation or destruction of new tiers of management or the movement of responsibility up or down these tiers (examples include the creation and destruction of Area Health Authorities, the creation of Regional Health Authorities and the NHS Management Executive). Horizontal reorganisations of power are changes in leadership: the merging, dividing or shifting of responsibility between different agencies or between different departments (examples include the creation of local authority Social Service Departments, the creation of Community Units or Community Trusts).

It is easy to be cynical about many of the structural changes and to feel that they represent the substitution of frenzied activity and change for real leadership. However the most recent of these organisational changes to the NHS and Social Services, the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act, does seem to be of a different order. The fundamental change was the organisational separation of those who provide services and those who purchase (but do not provide services). From a distance this distinction does not seem important but it has led many organisations to reconsider their role and is having an increasingly important impact.

These ideas have arisen at a key moment in the history of human services in Britain, when government has been trying to find a way of resolving a deep internal problem. On one hand the limits of public finances demand that it finds a way to cap the spiralling cost of health and social services; on the other hand it needs to find a way of meeting the popular demand for these services by providing more services of a higher quality. Put simply, purchasing held out the promise to government that it could achieve both of these aspirations.

One of the intellectual godfathers of this new idea was Alain Enthoven. He argued that, while the British system was good at controlling costs it was bad at improving quality and efficiency. In fact, the service system was actually blocking quality improvements, innovation and opportunities for greater efficiency. He argued that the system was in 'gridlock' and incapable of delivering change and that continued top-down government control was robbing service managers of the opportunity to innovate. Instead services

‘passed the buck’ back to the government. He argued that by separating purchasers from providers it would be possible to have a degree of healthy competition within the confines of a state funded system. Some agencies could take on the role of purchaser, seeking value for money by choosing between the different agencies available and not feeling responsible for the impact of those choices on the different provider agencies. Other agencies could become providers, controlling their own internal affairs and free to do things differently but answerable to the logic of the ‘internal market’: that the purchaser will prefer better quality and cheaper services.

Another important theme for these changes was provided by Roy Griffiths in his 1988 report *Community Care: Agenda for Action*. He pointed out that the overlapping responsibilities of the NHS and local authorities in areas like services for people with learning difficulties caused confusion and bad planning. Instead he proposed that two broad fields be distinguished, health care and social care and that the NHS and Social Services would take lead planning responsibility in each area respectively. He also suggested that, instead of funding residential and nursing homes through the benefit system it would be better for the Social Service Department to be given that stream of funding, and for them to use that money to design flexible and individualised services that would allow people to get a service in their own home.

The combination of these new ideas about purchasing and Roy Griffiths’ proposals then informed the *1990 NHS and Community Care Act* and in essence appeared to have sown the seeds of a major shift in British Social Policy. For people with learning difficulties the one immediate implication of these changes was that people lost their future entitlement to Board and Lodging payments from the Department of Social Security, but gained the right to an assessment for community care support from the Social Services Department, who would then be responsible for funding any additional support the individual required.

However the Act did more than just alter the way funding was organised. It marked an important shift in the self-understanding of human service organisations across the country. Some started to see themselves as purchasers, some as providers; local authorities took on lead authority status for social care while health authorities took lead authority status for health care; and Social Services developed Community Care Plans, setting out local strategy, and developed systems of assessment and care management in order to manage the process of offering people individualised support packages.

The modern challenge

When we unite these two historical threads: first, the increasing awareness of the rights of people with learning difficulties and the need for community integration and, second, the attempt to redesign human services in ways which improve the cost-effectiveness and quality of those services; it is possible to identify an important threat and an important opportunity for people with learning difficulties.

The threat to people with learning difficulties is that their needs are not seen as a priority by the community, and that in the battle to squeeze more services out of less funding, they are simply forced to accept less of the same kind of service they have historically received. The opportunity lies in our hands to show that if the community

give individuals their entitlements in ways which enhance their ability to lead their own life, and to contribute to the lives of others in their community, then the status and position of people with learning difficulties will be stronger and more assured.

Over the last few years it has become apparent that in some areas the changes to the human service system have been more than just cosmetic. Early indications are that new options for support are slowly being made available to people which differ significantly from service developments in the 1980s. Thus, the combination of new legislation, the rhetoric of Community Care, the separation of roles and the vast learning from an Ordinary Life philosophy in the 1980s heralds a new era, which, if we are able to work in partnership with people with learning difficulties, may just take us that important step further towards full citizenship.

The current misunderstanding of purchasing

The challenge we face is to understand this new idea of purchasing in a way that really supports greater community integration and full citizenship. However, the prevalent understanding of purchasing is a major obstacle to facing and meeting this challenge. The understanding of purchasing at present is far too limited to be of use to people with learning difficulties.

The bureaucratic planning cycle

The prevalent and narrow understanding of purchasing can be described by means of a circular, five stage, process:

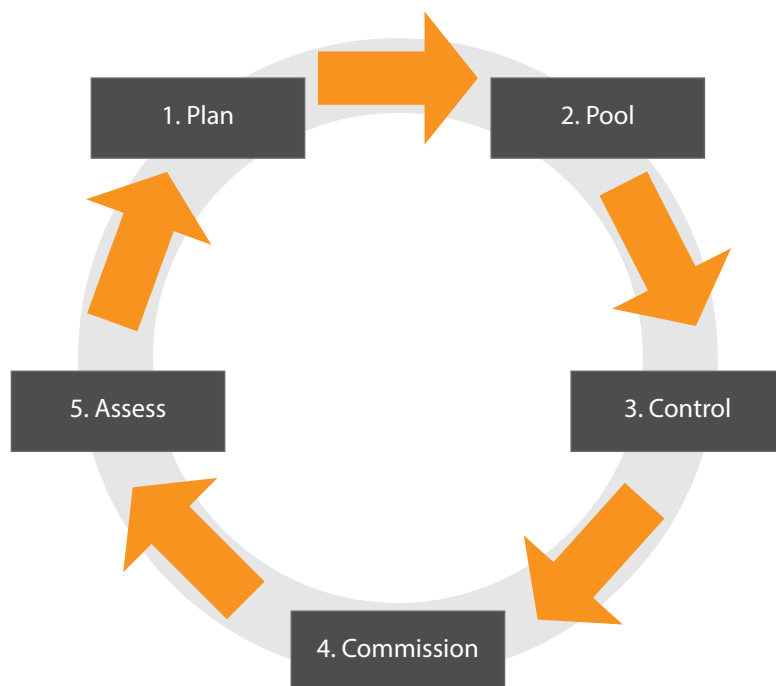


Figure 1 The Bureaucratic Planning Cycle

1. Plan

The first task is to develop a plan, a plan which sets out what should be done. This plan is put out for consultation and then published. The plan determines what the purchaser should do.

2. Pool resources

The second task is to ensure that the purchaser has all the power necessary to carry out the plan. This has led to a number of horizontal mergers or changes in responsibility between different agencies.

Some of the most popular strategies are:

- The merging of District Health Authorities - to create super purchasers
- The merging of Family Health Service Authorities and District Health Authorities - to create unified health purchasers
- The transfer of budgets from the NHS to Social Services - to streamline social care purchasing
- The creation of local purchasing teams involving GPs, District Health Authority Interests and Social Services

A fifth horizontal strategy is the creation of a new specialist purchasing agency specifically for people with learning difficulties and which pools NHS and Social Services money within it.

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3. Design systems of control

The third task for the purchaser is to define the relationships it has with those it funds: the providers. Increasingly purchasers are moving away from providing services that are managed from within their own organisation and are instead seeking to provide services through independent organisations, where the nature of the relationship is set out more explicitly in a negotiated service agreement or contract.

4. Commission services

The fourth task is to find and commission the provision of professional services for people with learning difficulties in order to meet their needs.

There seem to be two typical strategies for achieving this:

- Transferring services out of the purchaser organisation into either complete independence or a semi-independent organisation such as an NHS Trust or Social Services business unit.
- Commissioning an established independent private or voluntary organisation to take on the work.

5. Assess needs

The fifth task, which also feeds back into the first task is to assess the needs of the users of the service.

This is done at three levels:

1. At the planning level decisions are made based on demographic information about the level of local need.
2. At the point of entering services an assessment of need is made by a professional social worker or care manager.
3. Within services there will be processes of individual planning which aim to address the changing needs of the individual.

The problem with this understanding of purchasing is that, while it seems logical, neat and familiar, its focus is misleading. For while it may be an adequate image of how planning takes place it gives an inadequate picture of how change in general happens. The bureaucratic planning cycle picture of purchasing is too narrow, it restricts our view of what is possible and leads our attention to the wrong places.

The missing elements

The inadequacies of the planning process as a model for how purchasers should think of their role can be explored by noticing the key elements which are missing from the bureaucratic planning cycle and which will need fuller consideration if purchasers are to fulfil their obligations to people with learning difficulties.

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1. The desires and expectations of the individual

One glaring omission is any sense of the desires and expectations, as opposed to the needs, of the individual receiving a service. The process assumes that needs can be measured and assessed and that eventually the plans of the purchaser will be changed. It ignores the fact that each person who receives a service is an individual who has their own desires and preferences which are constantly changing. The attempt by some to ‘involve’ the user in their own assessment indicates what many professionals know already: that the present assumptions are wrong, that this idea of “involvement” is still far too weak. Merely offering somebody involvement in their own life is just not good enough.

2. The community

Another obvious omission from this picture is the community itself. There is no reference to the interests or concerns of the community at any stage. The process assumes the one thing that it seems vital not to assume: that people with learning difficulties must live lives ‘inside’ services rather than as full community members.

3. Responsive services

This way of thinking also assumes that change always comes from above. For this reason it is often accepted that the service provider can be a large professional organisation for it merely has to deliver whatever the purchaser thinks is necessary and the only question is how effective the organisation is at delivering what the purchaser wants.

However, what is omitted from the picture is the fact that the kind of human service organisation which is really going to support people to be citizens of their community will need to be both flexible and responsive, with a real understanding of the community within which they work and the individuals they support. That is, they are going to have to respond to the individuals and communities they serve. If this is the case it seems likely that smaller, less hierarchical and locally-based organisations will be more likely to offer individuals choice and respond flexibly to changing circumstances.

4. The necessity of partnership

It is also assumed that there is no possibility of arriving at non-controlling partnerships with other purchasers, statutory bodies and key stake holders. The idea of leadership has become confused with the idea of control and instead of negotiating differences in responsibility and areas of co-operation purchasers have assumed that they must control all the relevant resources. We are not facing up to the fact that one agency cannot be responsible for everything. There will always be a number of different agencies who are responsible for different aspects of people's lives and they must learn how to work together to promote the interests of those they are there to serve.

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5. Learning together

It is also assumed that the relationships between the purchaser, the provider, the individual and other community members should be governed by the idea of control: that the organisation of services is just a matter of buying the right amount at the right price. What is forgotten is that proper human relations must be governed by mutual consent; particularly when there is uncertainty about what needs to be done.

The fact is that what is the 'right thing to buy' is never going to be a simple and certain matter, because it has to be the right thing for another human being. There will always be some uncertainty about what is the right thing, and that uncertainty means that we must learn together what is possible, and learning and problem-solving is impossible in a culture dominated by the idea of control. True learning takes place between equals.

6. The need for vision

Finally, the idea of a plan is far too narrow and does not include the broader and more central need for vision. Vision is vital for offering people good human services which are flexible and human. A vision must be inspirational and, in order to be inspirational, it must be based on real aspirations and dreams. For this reason the idea

of consultation is not enough, you cannot explore the dreams of another person or another group by asking them to comment on some prepared plan. Instead one must find ways of supporting the development of visions for individuals and the whole community.

An understanding of purchasing which makes these six omissions is dangerous. Such a narrow view limits what the purchaser is able to offer people with learning difficulties. Its underlying assumptions about human nature, and about how change takes place, are bureaucratic. It becomes impossible for purchasers to offer the best to people with learning difficulties and their communities because their way of looking at the world takes neither individuals nor communities seriously. Instead purchasers see their major role as the co-ordination of an orderly pattern of predetermined services. In order to widen our vision of what is possible for purchasing, we need to change our underlying picture of how human services should be delivered.

It is not that planning is bad. Planning is a vital part of any managerial process and good planning is going to be vital to the delivery of good supports to people with learning difficulties. It is that the idea of planning, on its own, is too narrow and internally focused to be a good way of thinking about the key activities of the purchaser. We will return to what purchasers should be doing in the chapter on strategies; but first of all we must understand the real purpose of the purchaser.

A transition to a new way of thinking

We have seen that one of the difficulties of really offering people with learning difficulties more appropriate opportunities for self-development and contribution is the operation of several assumptions about the way power operates in human services which militate against community integration. I believe that these assumptions are based on a particular ‘mental model’ (Senge) or ‘paradigm’ (Kuhn), that is, an organised picture of how things are, which determines the way we see the world and constrains our view of what is possible.

The Professional Gift Model

In order to find a more effective paradigm for the delivery of human services it is necessary to understand the paradigm that underlies our current understanding of purchasing as a form of bureaucratic planning. The traditional paradigm of how service delivery works could be described as the Professional Gift Model.

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The process of service delivery, as pictured by this paradigm, goes like this:

- The community is a tax-payer and a voter. The community gives the government or purchaser the financial resources to care for the needy and holds them accountable through elections for their performance.
- The government or purchaser transfers resources to the professional provider because the professional is supposed to understand the problem and will ensure that the problem is resolved.
- The professional provider assesses the exact needs of the needy person who comes forward.
- The professional provider then goes on to deliver the service to the needy person as a gift to the needy person.

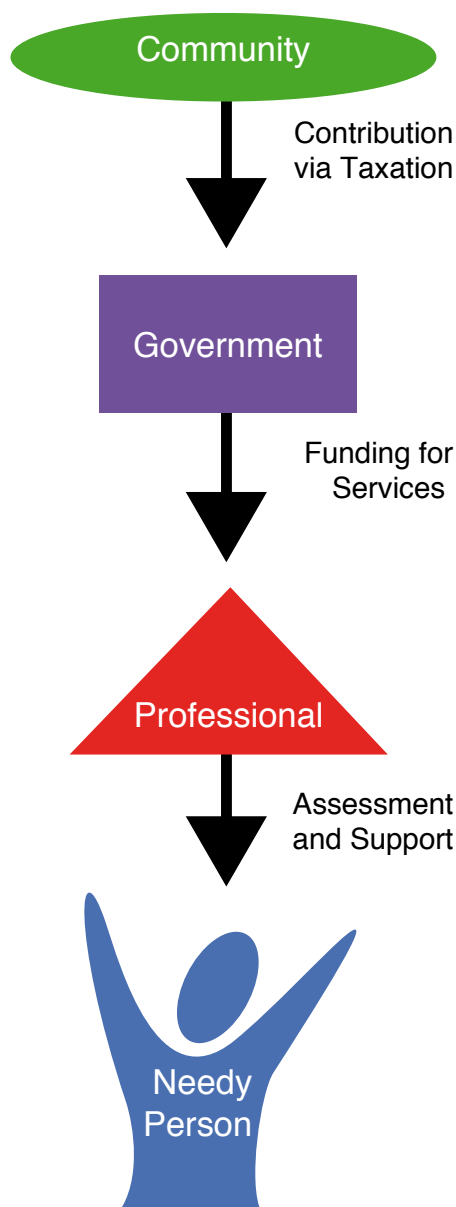


Figure 2 The Professional Gift Model

This model describes a power system, a process by which money and the authority to make decisions are transferred from the community, through the state, to professional providers. Finally, services are delivered to those that the system determines are in need of them. However, one of the reasons why services for people with learning difficulties have so often failed the people they are meant to serve, is that this system of service delivery fails to recognise its own inherent power to control the lives of the people it aims to serve.

The system operates as if it were a bountiful and benign patron handing out benefits to those who need them. It believes that its only major difficulties are getting enough money to spend and deciding who will be fortunate enough to receive help. It does not recognise that many of the benefits it hands out are of dubious value. It is as if the controlling power of the system is disguised by its status as a giver of gifts. Likewise, when services come as gifts, and so cannot be altered or refused by the recipient then

the giver should not be surprised if they do not receive gratitude and co-operation in return.

The Professional Gift Model presents two kinds of problem to the individual. The first and most fundamental problem is that the Professional Gift Model threatens the individual's autonomy simply by presuming that it has the right to make decisions on behalf of the individual. The Model presumes that it is the professional provider who determines the service and so, however excellent the service or the process of assessment, it undermines the individual's ability to make their own choices and carve out a life which is their own.

To some extent this problem is one we all face in our dealings with professionals, but normally the services of the expert cover only small specialised areas of our lives and are mitigated by our own social status, financial power or the help of our friends and family. However, people with learning difficulties are in a weaker position, they often need help throughout their lives, they lack social status and income and many have lost their potential allies after being institutionalised.

This loss of control has a severe effect on the individual's ability to lead their own life. Everyday choices (where to live, who to live with, what to eat, when to go to bed) are either removed, packaged into artificial moments of choice or given to groups of people over whom the individual has no control. The way of life of the individual is defined by the solutions of the professionals; solutions that are constrained by the supposed limitations of economies of scale or the limited imagination of an anonymous planner.

This loss of control is not only damaging to one's dignity as an individual but, and this is the second problem, it also puts the individual at grave risk. It is not possible for bureaucratic systems to pay perfect attention to the interests of those that they serve. Like all human systems, the different agencies which deliver services have their own internal interests. Politicians must try and remain in power and not over-tax their constituents. Providers must reward themselves with pay and status. Unless the power of the individual is increased it is far too easy for their interests to be swamped by these other competing interests. And so, the Professional Gift Model not only threatens the individual's autonomy but also the whole quality of the individual's life, for it is incapable of securing the individual's interests.

In fact, if one interprets the *NHS and Community Care Act (1990)* through the paradigm of the Professional Gift Model, those reforms can be seen as only the merest tweaking of the fundamental workings of the model:

- The relationship between purchaser and provider becomes contractual. The government or purchaser checks that the professional provider is delivering what it promised to deliver.
- Assessment of needs is now meant to take place in a process independent of the provider and controlled by the purchaser (i.e. care management)

In order to really find a way forward we need to recognise that it is the Professional Gift Model that is holding us back and that it is based on false assumptions about how the delivery of services to people with learning difficulties must be organised. Only a change in the fundamental paradigm of service delivery will enable us to put the Community Care reforms to good use. Only a way of thinking about human services which does not threaten the individual's autonomy and their relationship to the wider community can help us to better understand what we should be doing.

The Citizenship Model

A better way of thinking about the organisation of service delivery to people with learning difficulties is offered by the Citizenship Model of service delivery. This model assumes that the starting point for our thoughts must be the individual living as a member of their community. The role of both the provider and purchaser of services is to enable the individual to play a full part in the community and not to cut the individual off from their community.

In contrast to the Professional Gift Model it has the following features:

- The individual is an active part of their community and is supported by that community.
- The purchaser and the provider are ‘off-stage’ providing support or finance and at times leadership, but without disabling the community.
- There is a balance of power between the different legitimate interests of the individual, the purchaser and the provider.
- The individual negotiates with the purchaser and the provider to agree a fair level of resources and appropriate professional inputs.
- The community provides the purchaser with the resources to enable it to give individuals the resources they are entitled to.

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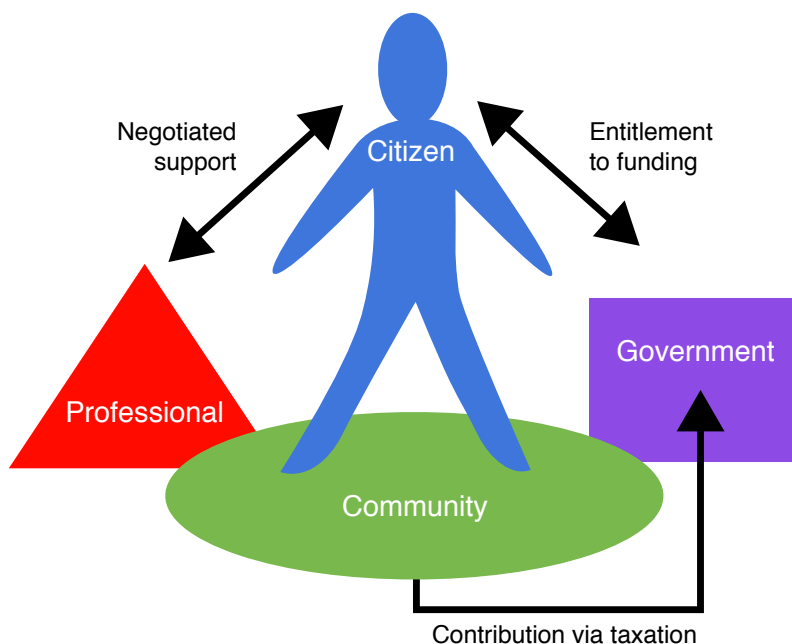


Figure 3 The Citizenship Model

As with the Professional Gift Model the same four key interests are operating within the service system: the individual with learning difficulties; the provider (that is, a professional service for people with learning difficulties); the purchaser (that is, an agency which is responsible for funding services) and finally the community itself, in particular the actual or potential community of family, friends, colleagues, neighbours that the individual has, or, can be supported to have.

However, where the Professional Gift Model sees the community as only a taxpayer and voter, the Citizenship Model sees the community as the home of the individual as well. The community is the natural means of offering the individual support, love and friendship, and the role of the purchaser and the provider is to promote and develop the relationship between the individual and their community so that it can be of benefit to both.

Instead of merely seeing the individual as someone with needs, as reflected in labels like “patient” (one who is passive) or “disabled person” (one who cannot do) the individual is seen as a person who is offering something, who is forming a life for him or herself. Each individual has their own personality, their own skills, their own capacity to make friendships. Moreover, if one accepts that the individual is entitled to some of the community’s resources because of their legitimate need for support, then the individual is also a financial asset to that community, someone who can pay their way, someone who offers others in the community an opportunity for employment and the chance to learn new skills.

The purchaser can be seen, not as an authority over the community, but as the device that the community uses to pool together some of its resources in order to transfer them to those with a legitimate call on them. The purchaser is then less an agent of the state and more a kind of community insurance scheme. A kind of local AA or RAC to which everybody in the community contributes and which pays out to those who are born with learning difficulties.

The provider can be seen, not as a container of people with learning difficulties, but as the mechanism by which the community concentrates particular skills and enthusiasms. The provider does not take on responsibility for all the problems individuals face but acts as a catalyst to the local solution of these problems. To continue our analogy, it might be better to see providers as car mechanics, capable of offering advice, help and particular services, but not owning or controlling the car.

Finally, it is important to note that the Citizenship Model offers us a better way of understanding how these different interests are related to each other. Within the Professional Gift Model there is nothing that is contractual or reciprocal, the individual with learning difficulties has nothing to bring and no agreement needs to be reached with the individual. In the Citizenship Model the relationships that exist between each interest are not unilateral (not a ‘one-way street’) but reciprocal, consenting relationships. Each of these interests can interact with the others and the modes of interaction, the types of relationship, can include and extend beyond merely giving or receiving to include sharing, communicating and learning together.

This new model is a significant advance over the previous model because it brings together two important lessons learnt by people with learning difficulties and their allies. Firstly, it is important to recognise that the real needs for support that some of us have imply clear entitlements to the community’s resources. It is not sufficient for the person with a learning disability to await whatever charity is handed out. It is unbecoming both to the dignity of the individual and to the dignity of society to leave people without the basic means for leading their own life. People with learning difficulties have a right to support.

Secondly, it is important that the system of service delivery does not deliver support in a way which limits, controls and weakens the individual or cuts them off from their community but, instead, enables the individual to be a full citizen of the community.

This means that people not only have a right to be supported but must have the right to determine how they are supported (that means the individual must determine who supports, when, where and to what ends). The paradigm offered by the Citizenship Model can open our minds to a wholly different way of thinking about our roles and relationships. If we embrace this new paradigm exciting opportunities become available and old certainties are revealed as unhelpful prejudices. Make no mistake this new paradigm does not make things easier, new challenges will also have to be faced; but these challenges will be the right challenges.

The strategic responsibilities of the purchaser

The Citizenship Model helps us to understand what the role of the purchaser is. The purchaser is the agency to which the community has entrusted some of its resources in order to fulfil its obligation to people with learning difficulties. Primarily that obligation is to ensure that people with learning difficulties are enabled to lead their own lives as members of the community.

However, to understand what purchasing involves in practice requires an overview of the broad strategic responsibilities of the purchaser. I think that we can identify at least six areas where purchasers must invest energy.

The first four of these are the different types of interest within the purchaser's environment:

- Individuals
- The community
- Service providers
- Other purchasers or influential bodies in the environment

The remaining two are matters which influence the whole environment:

- Relationships
- Vision

How we understand the responsibilities of the purchaser within each of these areas of operation depends upon our understanding of social welfare. So, in order to try and draw out the difference that the Citizenship Model makes to our understanding, these strategic responsibilities have been set out as a series of transformations from a current to a preferred understanding of the purchaser's role, based on the Citizenship Model.

One of the matters that is not touched upon below is the extent to which purchasers should work directly in the area concerned, or to what extent it is appropriate to work through other agencies. The Citizenship Model implies that purchasers have a direct responsibility to the individual and the community and should not hide behind the provider.

However, the Citizenship Model does not imply that an agency which sees itself as primarily a purchaser cannot work through other agencies or that an agency which sees itself as primarily a provider has none of the responsibilities described. These

distinctions are meant to help envisage better forms of practice not divide the world up into tight categories. Just as an individual can also be a member of the community, or a member of the community can also be a provider, so can a provider also be a purchaser.

1. Promoting the power of the individual

The most important responsibility of the purchaser is directly to the individual with learning difficulties. However, that responsibility is not about compensating someone for the “level” of their disability. The Professional Gift Model encourages us to see the individual who is receiving a service as merely needy, as no more than the list of their ‘skill deficits’.

Instead the Citizenship Model encourages us to see the power of the individual as central to everything that we do. Services, or more importantly lives, should not be thought of as things which can merely be given to you; instead we should see them as developing naturally out of the relationships that the individual has. So, besides having a responsibility to allocate a fair level of funding to the individual, purchasers also have a responsibility to make the individual more powerful. For people need power if they are to lead their own lives.

To be more powerful the individual will need support in four key areas of life:

- 1. Voice** - Human services have not been skilled at listening to what individuals with learning difficulties actually want, at examining all of the conceivable options and working through the necessary changes with people. Although most services have invested in individual planning processes, these are often processes in which the individual is a passive bystander or an inconvenience. The decisions that are made are those taken in the narrowest of service contexts and with a minimal impact on the course of a person’s life. Purchasers need to examine how the voice or dreams of the individual can be heard and their expectations raised.
- 2. Control** - Human services often deprive the individuals who use services, their families or advocates of any formal authority to alter the decisions that they make on behalf of people. Normally, money is given to services and budgets are controlled by managers, while individuals have no control over the money that funds their services. Purchasers will instead need to find ways of delegating money and authority as close to the person as possible.
- 3. Allies** - Typical service responses start by putting in place professional supports who are then asked to “integrate people into their community”. This process undermines the confidence of the individual, their family and other community members and encourages providers to see the request that they substitute professional support for community support as merely providing an excuse to cut a service. Helping an individual with learning difficulties becomes a professional matter which puts a wall around the individual and undermines providers’ subsequent attempts at community integration. Purchasers will need to work in ways which recognise that the community can be a source of real power and protection for the individual and that the individual can become a real asset to their community.

- 4. Home** - Decisions about support services are frequently mixed up with decisions about housing and this means that people are often deprived of any real housing rights. When problems occur in their house it is the person with learning difficulties who is moved. To not have a home is to lack a fundamental asset. Having a real home means that one has a base, a starting place, a place to come home to, a place which can be the foundation of personal strength and self-assurance. Purchasers must ensure that people have real homes and are not moved around to the service's convenience. This means working closely with housing agencies, and if necessary taking on a leadership role in enabling access to generic community resources.

In my book *Keys to Citizenship* (2006) I explore the many different strategies that can be used to increase people's power and citizenship.

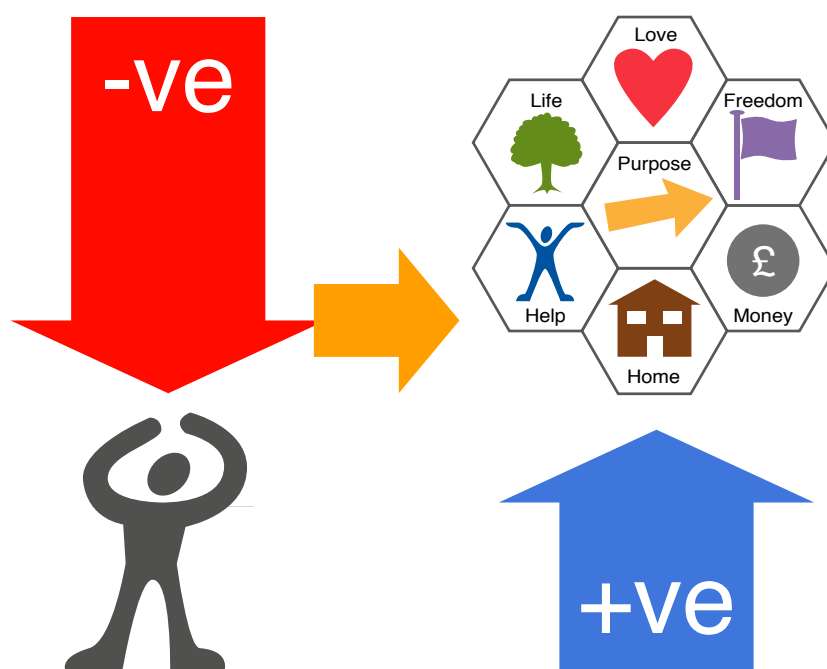


Figure 4 From the needy individual to the powerful citizen

The primary challenge inherent to this strategy is learning how to both respect and foster personal autonomy, while keeping the individual and the community healthy and safe. Some people with learning difficulties will lack experience of the range of possible choices and the consequences of those choices; for others communicating any choice may be difficult. So while the possibility of expressing preferences must be extended, and opportunities for experiencing different options must be pursued, there will continue to be a need to use the judgements of others in determining what is right for an individual. Purchasers will need to develop judgements about whose judgements can be trusted and about where in an individual's life the discretion of others is vital. If the purchaser is neither sensitive to the complexity of the idea of autonomy nor able to build positive strategies to extend that autonomy then it is likely that the purchaser will invest in defensive, custodial support systems which further exacerbate the problems individuals face.

2. Investing in the community

A further danger of the Professional Gift Model is that it assumes that the job of the purchaser is merely to identify and fund a provider to “integrate the client into the local community”. In this way it loses the opportunity to invest directly in the community in order to support the community’s ability to support the individual. The Citizenship Model repositions the community, making it the natural and first place to seek out support for an individual with a disability. The task for the purchaser and the provider is to identify how such community supports can be underpinned or prompted with practical support, guidance, advice or financial aid, and only when it is really necessary, to use professional support.

This new way of thinking about the role of purchasers suggests that in order to promote the interests of people with learning difficulties it will have to become an agency of community development. In the past, services have claimed that there is no community, no community spirit, no neighbourly care. The challenge that this new paradigm sets us is to develop services which build in the involvement of the community, even where it is lacking. The purchaser must enhance the capacity of the community to support each of its members who has learning difficulties and provide positive incentives to providers to reorganise their services in ways which promote rather than merely await community involvement.

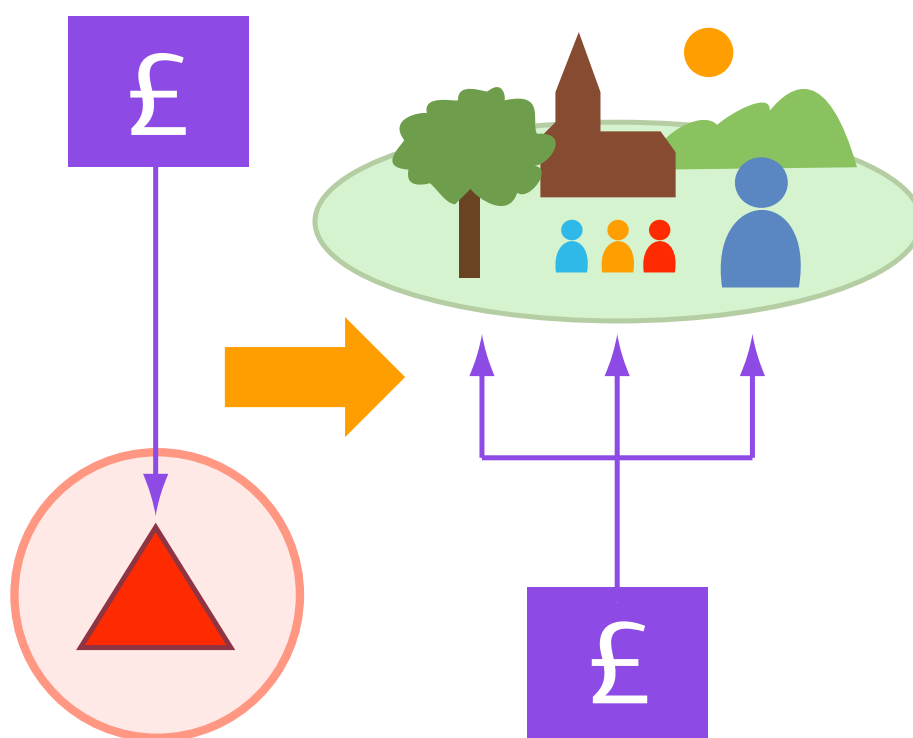


Figure 5 From waiting for community to investing in community

The key challenge inherent in this strategy is to work out how to appropriately support someone’s community. The Professional Gift Model pays no attention to the advantages or hazards of such subsidies because it assumes that the service ‘takes care’ of the

individual. Determining to what extent it is appropriate for community funds to go towards an individual's family, friends or work colleagues requires a new subtlety of judgement and negotiation which will be foreign to existing practices.

3. Developing responsive services

Purchasers have been investing a lot of their energy in creating contracts which control service providers. Unfortunately the focus of that energy has been on achieving adequate control from 'above' rather than on promoting responsiveness to the individuals and families who use those services. Again, the Professional Gift Model assumes that the question of what service should be provided to an individual is a technical one, a question that can be left to the professionals. However, the Citizenship Model sees service design as something that must be done between the individual, their community and, where necessary, professional agencies. This means that the real challenge for purchasers is not that they develop services which are responsive to purchasers themselves but they develop services which are responsive to individuals with disabilities, their families and their friends.

Purchasers have tended to feel that large business-like providers with clear bureaucratic structures are in some way "safer". This has encouraged the wide use of large national, regional or statutory agencies to provide services. However, if services are to be truly responsive to individuals then this will not be a helpful strategy. If a greater number of agencies exist then people will tend to have more choice. If agencies are linked to a particular locality that means they will understand and be more committed to the local community. Smaller, less hierarchical organisations are better at keeping decisions close to the individuals who receive services. A range of different but overlapping organisations promotes innovation, competition and cross-learning (although it may require purchasers to promote this cross-learning and not simply wait for it to happen).

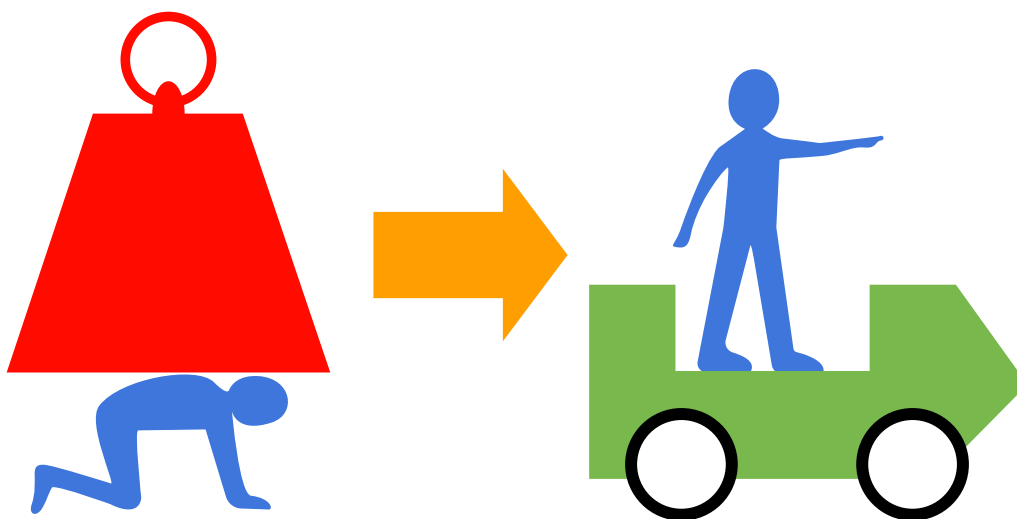


Figure 6 From bureaucratic control to responsive services

However, the development of a responsive market of service providers will not happen without positive plans to disinvest from larger organisations and create and support new organisations. Nor will purchasers be able to stand too far back from the practical question of how to support the development of new, more appropriate services. Purchasers may well need to recognise and reward personal and organisational talent, they will need to manage the market and promote service developments. Given the limited degree of high quality service provision and the relative weakness of the consumers as a force for change it may not be good enough to rely on the 'market' to promote helpful change.

4. Alliances for change

The fourth kind of interest that purchasers must pay attention to are other bodies like themselves: other purchasers, statutory or semi-statutory bodies, charities and campaigning bodies. All these bodies can have an enormous impact on the environment within which people with learning difficulties live. For instance the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) determines many people's personal income and the impact of wages on that income. Housing departments within local authorities and Housing Associations determine the availability of social housing.

Yet, in general, the energy of many purchasers has not been invested in creating partnerships and alliances with bodies like those. Instead energy is invested in determining which agency will be the purchaser for services for people with learning difficulties. Although at times there may be good arguments for merging one organisation with another, the present mania for mergers, take-overs or the construction of elaborate joint working mechanisms seems out of proportion to the value created for people with learning difficulties. In fact, at times, the constant organisational confusion seems better designed to confuse people; so that nobody knows who they should hold accountable for anything.

In order to start offering people with learning difficulties better lives it seems that we would do better to see merging - and its assumption that the only way of getting what you want is to control it, which has still to be really tested - as only one option. Purchasers should also be investing time in exploring ways in which alliances can be made to change the environment for the people whom they there to serve.

This means making alliances with other purchasers who serve people with learning difficulties and other bodies who have an impact on people with learning difficulties. We will need to accept the fact that there can never be just one body that is responsible for everything (or may be there is one body, but it's called Parliament and it is at the heart of the process by which responsibilities are divided up). We will need to pay more attention to the visions which can unite different interests.

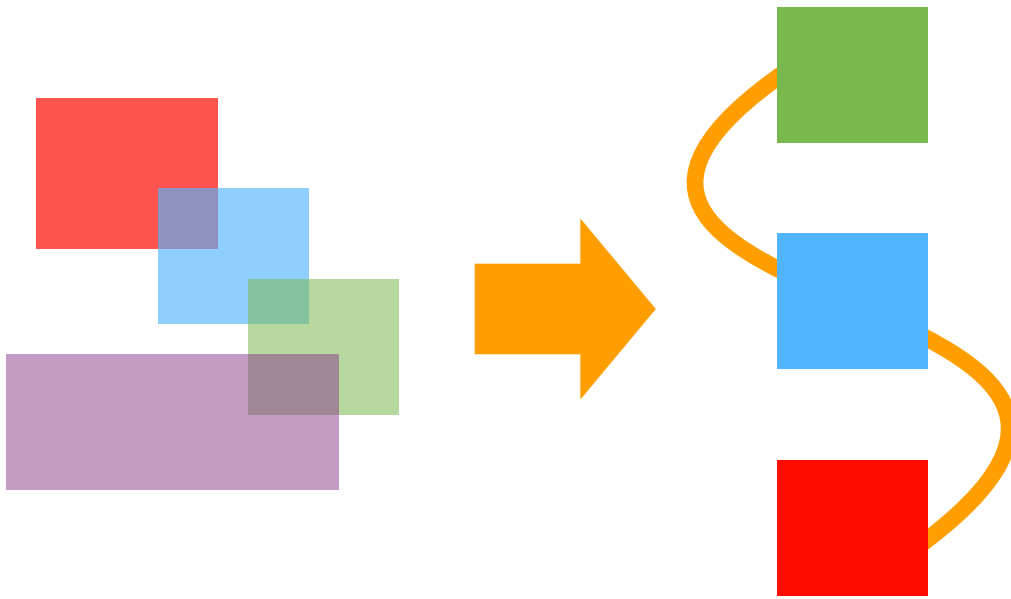


Figure 7 From merging organisations to making alliances

What is required is the exercise of real leadership. Not the ‘rationalisation of control’ but an attempt to identify what the real priorities are and to form alliances around those issues. It is only when purchasers begin to see the need to face up to this more difficult task that we will be able to tackle the real social and systemic obstacles to greater community integration: the poverty trap, discrimination and unequal access to community resources.

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5. Building relationships

It seems that there are two areas of general concern where purchasers must also invest energy: relationships and vision. The way we manage our relationships governs our ability to get what we need from others. However, the Professional Gift Model encourages us to see people with learning difficulties as merely the recipients of a gift, on the end of a one-way relationship they do not influence. This is damaging not only to the people who receive the “gift” but also to those who give it, the provider. For it encourages the provider to miss what the individual has to offer them, to ignore the individual’s skills, talents and capacities and disregard what the individual is saying through speech, posture, expression or action.

Purchasers must attend to the quality of the relationships that they create. Those relationships, to be fruitful relationships must work both ways and provide the individual with real rights to change, alter or refuse what is offered. Moreover, all services should be open to change and constant learning, they must respond immediately to the changing needs and desires of the individual and find ways of anticipating and supporting the individual in the development of their lifestyle. It is vital that organisations are allowed to adopt individual solutions to meet the desires of the individual.

It is also vital that both the purchaser and the provider do not assume they are ‘experts’ in what needs to be done. They both need to learn with and from the individual they are serving and this demands that they are both capable of change. There always will be an enormous amount not known about supporting people with learning difficulties because the bounds of how to support people are the bounds of life itself. To assume that either side knows completely what they are doing is very foolhardy.

However it is this belief that everything is known, that somebody is the real expert and that there is no room for joint exploration which creates damaging conflict.

Here is an example of the kind of conflict that happens frequently:

- An individual wants something different and complains: “I want more wages from the day centre.”
- The provider asks for extra resources: “We can’t give you more unless the purchaser gives us more funds.”
- The purchaser refuses and nothing changes: “We have no more to give, you must cut something else if you are to meet this individual demand.”
- And so on... the conflict may either continue, die out or the pressure will build and something else will be cut to fund the increase in wages.

What has happened in this conflict is that no one has been able to stop it from becoming merely a matter of resources; and so, it has become a zero-sum game (a situation where, for one person to win somebody else must lose), where an overall improvement is impossible (Thurow, 1981). What needs to happen is for us to find ways of making conflicts an opportunity for creative change.

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In the above example creative strategies could have been developed at many points:

- Finding out what is behind individual demand: “Should the day centre be helping people get real jobs?”
- Examining other options for the centre: “Should the day centre be making more money from the work that people do there?”
- Strategic change from the purchaser: “Should the purchaser be lobbying central government about the benefit trap?”

These more creative responses all imply that we must not approach the initial situation as if we already know what must be done. It is only by admitting that we may not be the experts that we can listen to those kinds of disputes creatively. So, one of the things purchasers must do is work constructively with ‘creative tension’ and avoid ‘winner takes all’ conflicts. It is also important to note that this is not just a complicated way of saying we must be nice to each other. Relationships that cut both ways place obligations on both sides - this calls for honesty, humility and a willingness to keep the individual with learning difficulties as the focus for all of our work.

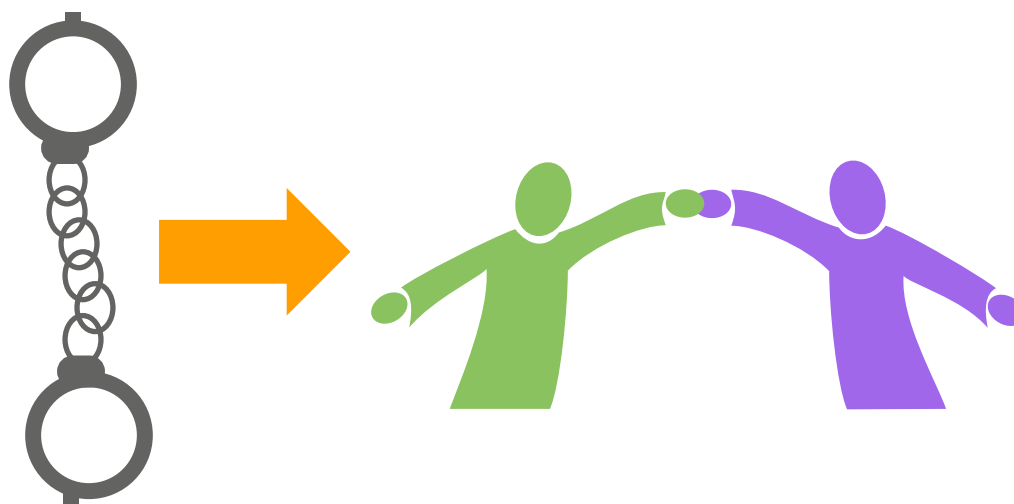


Figure 8 From enforcing control to relationships of consent

6. Sharing a vision

The final area where purchasers must invest energy is in sharing visions with people with learning difficulties, with those who care about them and with the wider community, sharing visions of a better future; visions which can both inspire and which can give guidance in times of uncertainty.

A vision cannot be created, alone, in a planning office (even though plans are still important). Just as a relationship needs at least two people to exist so a vision needs a group of people. A vision for a community must come from the hopes and aspirations of everyone in that community. A vision must be continually refreshed: by telling and hearing stories, by meeting new people and having new experiences, by being restated, by dreaming, by challenging expectations.

The objective of a shared vision sets an enormous challenge to agencies who tend to see the 'outside community' as hostile and who tend to take a defensive posture to that community. To begin to create a vision within a community will require skill and confidence on behalf of purchasers and an exploration of how public forums can be created for discussion and debate.

However, the most important starting point for the creation of vision is the individual. The creation of attractive visions of the future for individuals with learning difficulties, the process begun by those trying to do person-centred planning, is the foundation stone for learning about individuals and the lives they want to lead. Purchasers must ensure that there is good person-centred planning and purchasers must contribute to it and learn from it.

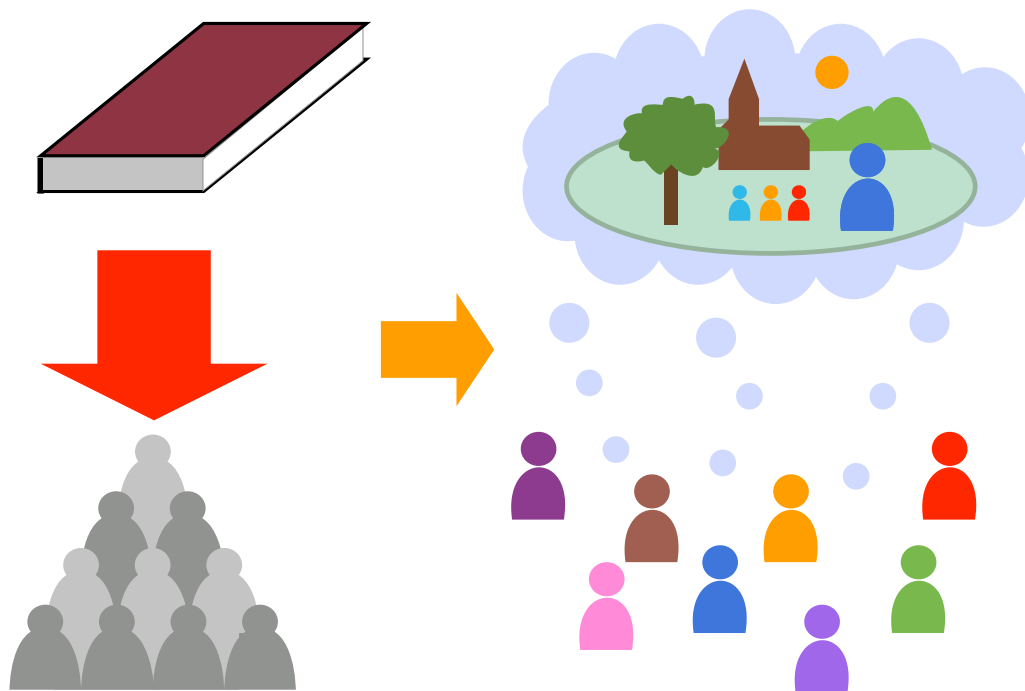


Figure 9 From making plans to sharing visions

An A to Z of purchasing

This section aims to cover some of the actual tactics and policies being pursued by some of the best purchasers in Britain. These tactics have been arranged in a dictionary format. Using a dictionary format implies that there is no right way to read the following chapter. It can be read forwards, backwards, randomly, or by personal interest. The first reason for using this format is that it is easy to dip into and fun to use.

The second reason for using the dictionary format is that it reminds us that practice, the actual techniques and processes we use, do not always flow neatly from theory. So, while many of these elements of good purchasing will seem to stem naturally from the preceding strategies, others will not. This should not worry us, it is far too early in the life of purchasing for any theory to guide us completely. Instead we must balance the need for an overall strategy with the need to pay attention to the individual examples of good practice that are around.

Advocacy

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Advocacy, or 'speaking for a cause', can play a vital role in the whole service system for people with learning difficulties and there is a role for many forms of advocacy:

- **Self-Advocacy** - Some people with learning difficulties are coming together in self-advocacy groups. This is a powerful way for individuals to learn how to speak up for themselves and such groups provide a focus for collective advocacy and campaigning.
- **Citizen Advocacy** - Citizen Advocacy is a way of linking a person with learning difficulties with a non-disabled partner to form a relationship which allows the non-disabled partner to represent the individual in some aspects of their life.
- **Parent Advocacy** - Many parents come together through Mencap, and increasingly other more local forums such as the Federation of Local Supported Living Groups, and many use other forums to have their voice heard.
- **System Advocacy** - Where there are complex systems such as the welfare system it is possible to create a function like Service Brokerage to help guide people through the complexities of the system.
- **Legal Advocacy** - Legal advocacy is the form of advocacy most of us are familiar with, that is the use of solicitors and barristers to guide us through the legal system.

For people who have difficulty in voicing their desires, either through lack of confidence or severe communication difficulties, advocacy is a vital tool for making services safer and better. Many services have been fearful of advocacy or have only

recognised particular forms of advocacy. However, if purchasers recognise their responsibility to make individuals more powerful then they will need to support all of these advocacy strategies and encourage the recognition and use of advocates by services.

At the same time, one of the challenges which the idea of advocacy confronts purchasers with is the need to ensure that advocacy is supported and encouraged without compromising its independence from services. Advocacy will challenge services and purchasers and providers will need to confront, not divert or block, these challenges. The purchaser will need to give room to advocates to say what they need to say and yet they will, to fulfil their obligation as the purchaser, have to do what they think is right. Disagreement and dialogue should never be discouraged, we simply have to recognise that there will be times when a decision must be made without agreement having been reached.

Alarm bells

One of the ways in which purchasers can begin to substitute inspection for a less intrusive method of assuring themselves that they are getting a good service is to ensure that there is somebody in that person's life who will 'ring an alarm bell' for the person. Particularly if someone has any difficulty speaking for themselves then it must be a priority to find someone who has enough contact and independent insight to recognise situations which are worrying.

If individuals or their friends or allies have the ability to recognise and communicate their concerns, then it is important that they are given an easy system for raising the alarm. There needs to be an awareness of the individual's rights. The system must be accessible, using systems like: a complaints hot-line, complaints card or nominated contact point. A growing number of people have Circles of Friends or Circles of Support who are there to help the person discover and then get what they want. Having ordinary 'community' people, who are not part of the system, keeping in touch with people with learning difficulties is one of the most powerful safeguards that people can have.

Thinking about quality in this way is both more effective and less intrusive than solely investing in inspections. It is difficult to make an inspection and be sensitive to all the choices and compromises that go on in the life of someone you do not know. It is difficult to make an inspection of a place without at the same time saying "this isn't really your place".

Broadening Horizons

One of the roles of the purchaser is to lift the expectations of those who provide services. This means enabling people to share their experiences and dream of new possibilities by developing local learning networks which bring together purchasers,

providers and other community members.

Purchasers should also encourage people to travel to different places and bring back new stories and new ways of doing things. This process becomes even more important the better a service becomes at local investment; for it is not only vital to foster local talent but also to develop links across the country and the world from which local talent can gain inspiration.

Buying locally

There are a number of reasons why it is imperative for purchasers to buy local services. First, it encourages responsiveness. Truly local providers will not be 'commuting into' neighbourhoods they are ignorant of. Second it is an investment in the community. Purchasing from local services creates an economic investment in that neighbourhood, skills are not imported and money is not sent outside the local area. Third, it makes the individual stronger. Local purchasing encourages people to see the individual not as a liability but as an asset to the local economy - an employer of staff.

The worst case of the failure to invest locally is where local people, who wish to live locally, are living in 'out-of-borough', 'out-of-district', 'out-of-county' or 'out-of-region' placements. However, an issue which is still in a state of confusion is how to relate the desire to buy locally, to the desire to support individuals to live wherever they wish. Purchasers should work towards a shared framework which allows people to move where they wish to move, whether or not the 'old' or the 'new' community takes on responsibility for funding support.

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Celebrations

For the community to begin to understand how their fellow citizens with learning difficulties can make a contribution to their community it will be important to celebrate their role in society. This has been done by sponsoring integrated sporting events, musical events or art and drama shows and by creating opportunities for local people to display their talents. It is vital that individuals have the opportunity to celebrate themselves and that the community has the opportunity to learn from all its members.

Challenging behaviour

The label 'challenging behaviour' was created in order to remind people that it was not the person but the behaviour that was the problem. Unfortunately as with many such tags the label has now taken on a life of its own and is now frequently treated as if it describes some kind of medical condition. The reasons why someone might exhibit 'challenging behaviour' are varied, and at times difficult to guess, but they can include

a desire to let off steam or express legitimate emotions, a way of communicating, the result of pain or mental ill health, a way of expressing a desire not to conform.

The challenge for purchasers is to find ways of investing in people and structures which can address each person individually and not just treat people as examples of some problem group. This will require the co-operation of specialists and families in order to maximise the chances of success. It will also require purchasers to be able to make pragmatic and speedy responses in times of crisis: finding an empty flat, extra staff, money; but not investing in institutionalised responses that are expensive to undo.

Charters

Charters have been used by some purchasers to give people or their allies public standards by which the purchaser and the provider can be held accountable. To function well these charters must be public and therefore, accessible to the individuals who use services and those who might advocate for them. They must also be provided in different formats to meet people's different communication needs, including tapes and videos.

A charter is not meant to be a rule-book governing all services. It should focus on the outcomes that individuals can expect from services. It should be a way of trying to understand services from the perspective of the individual and can be developed between the self-advocacy movement and services. Additionally, if there is a charter, it needs to be positively implemented and adhered to. If they too become another piece of meaningless rhetoric, they are not worth having.

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Community development

Another way of approaching decisions about how to find support within the community for people with learning difficulties is to fund agencies which will offer benefits to the wider community, as well as people with learning difficulties. In fact, the benefits to people with learning difficulties may only be a side-product of an organisation's work and, as such, the purchaser may wish to only partly fund the development. In its turn, part-funding can be a useful way of encouraging partnerships which cross over the 'service ghetto' wall.

Such development projects might include: community arts projects which create and display positive images of people with learning difficulties; community services which employ people with learning difficulties or funding for wheelchair-accessible leisure facilities.

Commissioning new provision

Purchasers can commission new provision in a number of ways:

- **Open tendering** - a service specification and the criteria selection are put out on the widest possible circulation; adverts are placed in the press.
- **Closed tendering** - a service specification is put out to a limited number of known providers.
- **Direct negotiations** - one service provider might be approached to take on a specific piece of work.
- **Co-operative development** - a change or development might be brought about through partnership between a number of providers.

At the heart of the matter is the question of how to develop a responsive market of locally based services. If all we do to our gardens is water them we end up with, not a garden, but a weed patch. In the same way purchasers cannot merely wave money and service specifications around. Talent must be seeded and nurtured, problems must be rooted out.

Contract management

Contract Management is a vital part of the purchasers role but to maximise its benefits it must remain highly flexible and self-conscious. Good purchasers are not just using one contracting format for their relationships but are varying the contract with the different agencies they fund. They encourage an on-going discussion on the nature of the relationship that is sought between the purchaser and the provider.

Some of the elements of good contract management include:

- **Face to face contact** - only face to face contact can help people move from sterile relationships to one's which promote a shared vision and an understanding of shared challenges.
- **Clear English** - good contract documents must be owned and understood by those who use them not written in legalese.
- **Realism** - asking for information which will be of real use and setting realistic standards and procedures is vital for promoting honesty and trust.
- **Flexible** - contracts which do not celebrate the variations clause will whither or become damaging. It is vital that both parties recognise the need for on-going change and mechanisms to keep the nature of the contract under review
- **Outcome orientated** - A contract which does not help both sides focus on the goals that both wish to achieve will become a burden and will never deliver what either side really requires

Cross-learning

One of the advantages of creating a wide number of providers is that this can provide many local opportunities for cross-learning: one agency looking at the work of its neighbour and learning from it. This can be a much more effective strategy for learning than an attempt from the purchaser to prescribe or merely train, for it encourages a process of continuous internal adaptation and allows providers to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Purchasers can do much to enhance this process by ensuring that its planning, quality, information, training and service-design strategies all encourage close contact between different providers. Some purchasers also make joint training a cornerstone of strategy and service development and actively promote initiatives that bring different providers together to learn with and from each other. Such involvement enables purchasers to become a driving force behind the vision.

Delegated problem-solving

One of the risks of purchasing is that purchasers will decide that some issue is so important that it must require a decision from the purchaser to go ahead. For instance, some purchasers may decide to specify staffing levels as part of their contract with a provider. If such issues always need to involve the purchaser then the danger is that any large purchaser will hold up decision-making and remove the decision from those close to the individual.

This failure in delegation is disabling for the individual and disabling for the provider. It encourages the provider to pass the buck to the purchaser, rather than resolving the matter with the individual and those close to the individual. It is vital that purchasers delegate decision-making and ensure that problems are confronted as close to the individual as possible and, at the same time, clearly specifying outcomes.

Disinvestment

One of the greatest obstacles in improving the opportunities offered to people with learning difficulties is not ignorance of how to do things differently, but not knowing how to stop doing what is already being done. This is particularly difficult where money is tied up in buildings or in large blocks of service that supposedly contain 'economies of scale'.

In the past there has been money provided for hospital closures in order to ease the process of disinvestment; but, it is unlikely that any significant amount of money is going to be made available to help people move out of Group Homes or change Day Centres. Increasingly disinvestment will have to be managed by paying much closer attention to the needs and requirements of the individuals served; and, by exploring ways that available finance can be put to better use by subsidising community supports.

Economies of scale

It is clear from the initial work of the Supported Living Programme that the belief that there are large economies of scale to be gained in putting people together in large groups is at best hugely exaggerated and at worst false. There are many obvious reasons for this, putting people together who do not want to live together increases costs when people have to be controlled because of their anger. Also, putting large groups of people together encourages staff to take on a caretaker role and invest time and attention in each other rather than in those they are there to serve. However, the most important diseconomy of scale is created by the failure to pay attention to the desires and capacities of each individual in the broadest way possible, and so, the opportunity is lost to identify a more imaginative way of supporting the individual.

Employment

The process of opening the doors to employment for people with learning difficulties has hardly begun, although where it has begun it has met with great success. As services get better at focusing on one individual at a time and people's expectations are raised then the demand for employment will continue to increase.

To meet this demand purchasers will need to focus on how their resources can be channelled, away from blocks of day services towards individualised support at work. Also the purchaser will need to form alliances with others to challenge the benefit system in order to enable more people to take advantage of opportunities for work.

There needs to be widespread recognition that supporting improvements in one area of a person's life will quickly lead to demands for change in others. People who are living in their own homes will not tolerate going to day centres, and people who are being employed will not tolerate living in other people's homes.

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Equity

As services move towards individual funding, and greater use of community supports, purchasers will need to pay increasing attention to the fairness of its decisions. In the past, when services have been provided as a block, equity was a straightforward matter; now, as funding is individualised, purchasers will have to pay attention to the extent of each individual's disability and the cost of supporting each individual's desired life which will not always be exactly proportionate to the extent of the disability. Costs will also vary in accordance with the extent of the community supports available to the individual and the cost of the individual's desired lifestyle. This is an area which will require much more thought in the coming years.

Promoting equity will not only involve a greater sense of what counts as fair between different individuals but also the development of a strategy to progressively increase equity between different individuals while not holding back the development of

innovative, community-based and individually-led services. In fact, if the overall level of tax-funded income is fixed then greater equity will require savings to be made in some areas; and only through innovations and the use of community resources will we find morally acceptable ways of making those savings.

Ethnic Communities

The UK is fortunate to have a wide variety of different ethnic cultures. For people with learning difficulties who are from a minority ethnic community, that community can be a source of pride and identity and provide resources to offer support. Each community may also bring views, religious beliefs or cultural practices which differ from the mainly white Protestant tradition of the UK.

Purchasers will need to ensure that the individual's cultural identity is recognised and that the community's general responsibility to people with learning difficulties is interpreted in a form that makes sense to those communities; while at the same time allowing the individual from an ethnic community to be an individual and not trapping them within some stereotype of how they are meant to be.

Friends and family

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The friends and family of people with learning difficulties are an enormous asset in their lives. Yet it seems such a challenge for services to work closely and appropriately with them. They can act as advocates for people with whom it is difficult to communicate. They can be organised into groups, sometimes called Joshua Committees, Personal Networks, Family Circles or Circles of Support in order to advocate, organise, co-ordinate, support or purchase support for and with the individual they care about. In fact early evidence suggests that the development of such networks is just as important as the development of person-centred plans to the creation of Supported Living. Additionally, the most important safeguard that an individual can have is to have someone outside of the system who loves them and cares about them enough to challenge the system.

Getting stuck in

Purchasers must ensure that decision-making of all kinds is delegated as close as possible to the individual and their allies. However, a balance must be maintained between purchasers remaining seemingly aloof from the real difficulties that people face on the ground and offering help when needed. This balancing act is always difficult; but it is important that purchasers experience the reality of people's lives and that they do not simplify and over-rationalise the problems that people with learning difficulties face.

One way to achieve this is for the purchaser to work closely with one individual with learning difficulties, and get to know them on a personal level. The depth of experience gained will inform the good judgement of the purchaser in a way that elaborate monitoring or information systems can never achieve.

Giving people the money

One of the most powerful ways of making services more responsive and empowering the individual is to ensure that budgets are delegated as far as possible. This can mean either delegating budgets within provider agencies to a very local level or delegating budgets to the individual or their friends and allies. Many physically disabled people have managed to get money from either purchasers or the Independent Living Fund to pay for their own personal assistance networks. Fewer people with learning difficulties have managed to achieve the same.

Individual contracting is one vehicle for such delegation. It provides a vehicle for the streaming of money in the way most appropriate to that individual, rather than assuming that all financial arrangements must be the same for each individual.

Housing

Another area where strategic alliances can promote wider opportunities for people with learning difficulties is that of housing. The development of services for people with learning difficulties has been based on the assumption that people's homes should be run by Social Services Departments, the NHS or independent care agencies or that they should belong to 'special housing schemes'. However the experience of the Supported Living Programme, of some support providers, many housing agencies and of the self-advocacy movement is that there is no reason why people with learning difficulties cannot have access to the full range of housing choices open to the rest of the community.

In order to make this possibility a reality it will be necessary to change the rules determining access to statutory housing, housing benefit and special needs housing finance. This is an enormous task and suggests that purchasers will need to think about how they can work in a way which challenges or at least attempts to amend local and national government policy. At the same time purchasers will need to explore how the private market can be used and how aids and adaptations can be used to make general housing accessible.

Individual contracts

Individual contracts are contracts between the individual and the purchaser or the individual and the provider (that is, they are not the same as spot contracts which are contracts between a purchaser and a provider about an individual). Some purchasers are contracting directly with the individual and some are contracting with the individual and the provider. In this way purchasers are able to tailor their commitments to each individual directly and this enables the individual and their allies to be clear about how change can be managed.

From what has been learnt so far, it seems that it is vital to sort out at least three things in an individual contract: the individual price; the people who are important to the individual and how alarm bells can be rung for that person. Purchasers have a vital role in clarifying and developing these matters so that the level of funding is fair and adequate, the individual is in control of their own life and there are adequate safeguards for that person.

The contract document can provide a tool for accountability on all sides. It can set out the services that should be delivered and the available funding. They can also describe the process by which any change in a service is agreed.

Individual price

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A crucial element in the process of empowering the individual is to clarify the price of the service. Without some indication of available funding it is impossible to be innovative; for “necessity is the mother of invention” and we actually require some constraints in order to be imaginative. Of course, this does not imply that any specified level of funding can never be changed. Individual contracting arrangements will need to be sufficiently flexible to address any changing needs that the person has.

An important distinction in this respect is that the price is not the same as the cost; the price is the cost to the customer, in this case the purchaser. If you set a price you are bearing some degree of risk. It should be implicit that, to some extent, changes in cost will be borne by the provider; but that also includes the benefits of keeping costs below the price. Providers, out of necessity, will need to have contingencies (which purchasers allow them to keep as part of their contract) if they are not to be knocking on purchasers’ doors every time there is the slightest cost increase.

Individual purchasing

Some purchasers are finding ways to fund individuals, their families or circles of support directly so that they can purchase their own support. This is a powerful way of promoting the power of the individual. In this way the service consumer becomes a real customer.

Some purchasers are fearful that this means a loss of control and accountability. However this is a confusion. It is the Professional Gift Model which confuses us here. It encourages us to see individual purchasing as a gift to the individual; but now, instead of giving the individual the gift of a service which the giver controls, purchasers are giving away control to the individual (like giving somebody a gift voucher instead of a present). Instead, the relationship between the purchaser and the individual should be seen as governed by a contract. This contract dictates that the money be used to purchase support but allows the individual and their allies to determine the precise shape of that support, and who they ask to provide it.

Information

The management of information has had an increasing profile since the separation of purchasing and provision. It is an important resource, capable of offering people choices, assuring them of their rights and dispersing skills and expertise. For people with learning difficulties it is not only important that information is garnered and dispersed but that services experiment with the media that are used. Information needs to be transmitted by tape, video, in written form, with translations and with symbols. Information is a source of power if it is in a form that the individual can understand.

The same principle is true for service providers and the community as a whole; purchasers have a responsibility to ensure that people are informed, that there are bulletins, notice boards and forums for information exchange. In fact, it would seem that many of the problems faced by services, (for example the management of placements), are best understood as problems of information and that providing individuals, providers and the community with information will solve many problems that purchasers struggle with on their own.

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Innovation

Promoting innovation will be one of the central themes for purchasers wishing to create a responsive market of services and perhaps the central lesson from the private sector is that innovation cannot be legislated for but must be nourished. This means that purchasers will have to build structures which promote: information, delegation, cross-learning, smallness, piloting, building on success, celebration, championing and on-going learning. And, vitally, purchasers will need to keep themselves abreast of the latest developments. Innovation can only be supported if it is recognised in the first place!

The challenge for purchasers is to promote a chaotic and changing environment in which innovation can flourish while trying to keep that environment safe from intrusive legislation, financial problems, personal risk or staff burn-out. At the heart of this problem is the need to learn from the individuals we serve, to focus on their lives and learn from the achievements and problems. It is only being rooted in that reality that provides the sense of balance which enables us to change things for the right reason and not just for change's sake.

Joint purchasing

How one purchaser's responsibilities relate to that of another, particularly where there is some geographical overlap, is a cause of much professional debate. The conventional belief is that the rational thing to do is to put all the relevant funding in one pot and for that pot to be either managed by the Social Services Department, as lead purchaser, or for this responsibility to be contracted out. The arguments above have suggested that there are some reasons to be sceptical about the ultimate value of this approach and that there is an inevitable plurality of purchasers.

In some ways, having more than one purchaser can offer advantages to people with learning difficulties; just as we might prefer that there are at least two automobile rescue services in operation, so might we prefer a degree of competition between purchasers, and fear that the domination of one style of purchasing will limit our learning and our choice.

However, if purchasers are to take this more liberal approach to each other they will have to ensure that they do not waste money by doing the same things or serving the same people. In order to avoid such problems purchasers will need to negotiate different but harmonious responsibilities. The term "integrated purchasing" is sometimes used to describe this approach, which may prove a more realistic and beneficial approach to purchasing.

It would seem that the real issue at the moment is exactly what is purchased, and how it is done. We are in danger of losing sight of this in the quest for joint commissioning. Such activity will prove fruitless if we do not ultimately change what we purchase and revolutionise our methods of purchasing.

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Lateral purchasing

Purchasers can gain many benefits from funding organisations "laterally". That is, not as direct providers, but in peripheral roles, for example: different forms of advocacy; information management; community development; research work or technical assistance. Good purchasers will seek to create a service environment which is inherently responsive, and to achieve this aim it may well make sense to occasionally invest in projects which have a catalytic effect upon the market. This kind of investment has to be balanced with the need to ensure that the majority of resources are directed towards individuals and the need to encourage providers to be relatively self-sufficient.

Limits, risk and responsibility

A central question for purchasers is how to manage financial risk. There is an important balance to be found between encouraging self-responsibility (allowing organisations to feel the costs and benefits of their own actions) and the creation of an environment where the cost of risk is low. If organisations have to bear all the costs

of redundancies and purchasers pursue a radical disinvestment strategy then either small providers will shun the market or increase their prices to cover the inherent risks. Purchasers will need to explore strategies to reduce the cost of risk by either giving certain guarantees or by encouraging arrangements by which providers share the costs of risk.

Managing constraints

One of the fears that any purchaser has when asking the question: “What do you want?” is that they will not be able to afford the answer; and one of the reasons why the allies of people with learning difficulties often refuse to consider what they would really like for their friend is that they do not believe it is possible. In both these cases, fear of examining the real constraints that exist is being used to avoid imaginative and creative thinking.

The challenge for purchasers is to turn this process on its head and, while acknowledging the constraints, to move on to ask: “Well, what would it take to move toward your goal within those constraints?” This question is the one which good managers should be asking all the time and the results can often be surprising: money might be able to be used in unexpected ways, some new resources might become available in the new situation or the individual might well turn out to have all sorts of capabilities or qualities which have remained untapped.

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Models of support

One symptom of the Professional Gift Model is the craving for the correct model or models of support. If each individual has to design their own life then what someone else has done can never provide a perfect model for one’s own life. Group homes, life-sharing, adult placements, support tenancies and all such tags provide a useful shorthand to cover some of the features of the choices that others have made. But, it is vital to remember that shorthand is all these terms are; and, whatever lessons such models provide, they should not provide prescriptions for another individual.

Personal and career development

One of the ironies of the purchaser-provider split is that good purchasers will need to pay more attention than ever to the career and personal development of the support providers. Without large bureaucratic structures to climb individuals will need to be supported to move into new roles, and the purchaser will need to work with them to define such roles. Individuals may wish to start up organisations or to move from one project to another and a wise purchaser will provide individuals with the support to

make such moves. Purchasers who take a hands-off approach to these matters will find that the added insecurity of the new market environment will cause them to lose many of their best people to more nurturing environments.

Person-centred planning

The idea of person-centred planning may not appear to be a new one, for there have been forms of individual planning in most services for some time now. However, typical individual planning processes are highly constrained and limiting for those people they were designed to serve. In some places it has become normal for the system to design a rigid process for individual planning and, when the individual they are serving opts out of the process, the service decides to see that as a matter of their 'free choice'. Too easily services can forget what a grave responsibility it is to plan with another individual for their future; it is improper to fix on a particular process to define what planning is and then demand that the individual jumps through a hoop they did not design. The key to individual planning is to plan in an individualised way.

Person-centred planning assumes that the involvement of the individual is paramount and then tries to negotiate a way forward with the individual. There is no standard frequency, no standard group who must be involved, no standard format. Instead a planning process is designed around the individual, which brings in all their allies and supporters and tries to examine, in an imaginative way the questions that are relevant to them at that point.

Different strategic formulas have been developed within this approach: Essential Life Style Planning, Personal Futures Planning, Shared Action Planning and many more. However what is important is to ensure that there are individuals who are literate in the general principles and techniques of these approaches. Person-centred planning is perhaps the most important element of any strategy to improve the lives of people with learning difficulties and, at its most effective, it not only provides good plans for the future but welds together a group of allies for the individual.

Public and media

Purchasers have a central role in ensuring that the 'public appearance' of people with learning difficulties is positive. That means finding ways of legitimising people's right to long-term financial support through the community, while offering positive images of people's success within the community.

Some purchasers have invested in poster and photography projects or in the use of television, video, drama or dance. It is particularly important for purchasers to publicise people's successes, because the media tends to focus only on crises and on segregated services which undermine the image and dignity of people with learning difficulties.

Quality

It is vital that in agreeing processes for quality assurance both the provider and the purchaser are able to distinguish between: doing a good job and doing the right job.

Often quality assurance structures only focus on whether the provider is doing a “good” job, measuring the performance of an agency by some pre-set standard without asking whether that standard is the right one. Instead a lot of effort is put into ensuring that objectives and standards are set and work achieved.

However, the primary interest of the individual is that the people who are supporting them are doing the “right” job, that what they are doing is in line with where the individual wants to go in their life, that their support system builds on their strengths and capacities and is able to find ways of coping with their needs and vulnerabilities.

One definition of quality is that it is the best that the consumer wants. As such the best may even exceed the expectations of the consumer, but its test is the consumer; if the consumer does not like it then it is no good. Understanding quality in this way is not just a technical question, if we understand quality in this way we will need to explore how services can learn from their consumers. This can be done by using: accessible complaints processes; respecting and supporting advocates; clarifying expectations in charters and contracts; using service user evaluations and person-centred planning.

As purchasers mature and develop over the next few years they will be under increasing pressure to clarify their central values; particularly, their understanding of equity and quality. It is therefore vital that purchasers come to terms with these ideas in ways which respect the individuality of those they serve.

Real markets

The primary fear of any provider is that they will be undercut by some other agency and so will lose their funding. Of course, some believe this is the most important spur to improvements in quality and cost control. These two beliefs are based on a view of how “markets” work. However, to a certain extent this view of the “market” is exaggerated, not unusually as human services have been protected from the “market” over the past decades. It is therefore important for purchasers and providers to bear in mind the experiences of the real private sector, where there are many more ways different providers can interrelate.

Sometimes organisations will collaborate, doing new work in partnership, sharing ideas and technologies. Sometimes organisations will seek out market niches where their specialist skills can operate with little threat of competition. Finally, some organisations will create internal competition - safe competition where different parts of the organisation are encouraged to go their own way in order to see who comes up with the best solution to a particular problem. It is therefore vital that purchasers stay alive to the complexity of markets and do not impose a particular vision (and most likely a simple one) of how they think a market should work.

Regulations

One of the most important areas where a provider needs support is in handling the regulatory environment. One of the most unfortunate aspects of the modern world is the propensity of those with no real responsibility for actually doing things to develop more and more legislation or regulations to bind those whose job it is to do things.

For this reason, it is important that purchasers think very hard about the rules or regulations they make providers fulfil and that they do all they can to defend providers from rules and regulations, which in fact hold back development or simply involve wasting administrative time.

However, it is also important to support a culture where the rules that are settled upon are maintained and respect is paid to the laws of the land. In the medium term, purchasers will need to try and create a regulative environment which concentrates on the right things and supports Supported Living. At the moment it is clear that Supported Living is neither domiciliary care nor registered care homes. Thus the regulatory frameworks for both these models of service is unlikely to be useful.

Rewards and incentives

The key tool at the disposal of the contract manager is the management of rewards and penalties. Penalties are important. However it is vital that they are consistent, clear and agreed. Once the execution of penalties becomes the norm for the relationship then providers are only going to learn ways to avoid the penalties.

On the other hand if relationships can become mutually rewarding then they are more likely to promote trust and development. It is important then that a good performance or that the generation of savings is not followed by punitive cuts. Instead, purchasers need to explore ways in which providers can maintain ownership over their own achievements and if savings allow new investment elsewhere to enable the provider to make that investment. This may require explicit agreements setting out how the benefits of cost improvements will be handled.

Service brokerage

The idea of a service broker started in Canada. A service broker is not responsible for a support budget. That budget might be held by either the individual, a representative of the individual, a care provider or a contract manager. The service broker's key objective is to help the individual with learning difficulties, or those close to that person, to get what they want from the system.

One way of envisaging this role is to think about the different kinds of support that any individual might need to get the best deal possible:

- **Saying what you want** - Sometimes people need support in requesting things, making their needs known and saying what they want and do not want.
- **Looking at all the options** - Sometimes people need support in recognising all the choices that they have.
- **Making up your mind** - Sometimes people need support in coming to an agreement with the other parties and settling upon it.
- **Review what one receives** - Sometimes people need support in thinking through what they think of what they have received and thinking about the next steps they want to take in their life.
- **Getting things changed** - Sometimes people need support in changing, amending or complaining about a service they receive.

It is important that service brokerage is not seen as a panacea for all the problems of designing good services for people. Even the best service broker is not a wonder-worker. Ideally they will act as a catalyst or spur to the planning done by the individual, their network and those who provide services. Service brokerage is like a technical adaptation for the service's inherent weakness at planning with people; and as with any adaptation too much unnecessary reliance will increase, not reduce, that weakness.

Service development

Purchasers will need to facilitate the development of new types of provision, help new organisations to come into existence or enable present organisations to adapt and change. This aspect of the commissioning of services cannot be done merely by “putting out a tender”. Services still need a lot of support to take on the responsibilities of running organisations, proper financial management and marketing. Skills need to be developed and experiences shared.

Some purchasers have invested in specialists in service development while others have linked the theme of service development into training and have supported all of their key providers to form a joint training structure. An important principle in service development is to pilot ideas, to work quickly and on a small scale; grand plans are rarely implemented.

Staying small

One of the key advantages of the new purchasing environment is that it allows organisations, both purchasers and providers to stay small. This is a vital requirement if organisations are really going to stay close to those they are serving and to the community that they hope to work with in supporting the individual. Bureaucracy reduces responsiveness, slowing down the time it takes to make a decision and moving the decision away from the individual.

Of course, it is not easy to define what counts as ‘small’ but the essence of it must be that the scale is human, that people know each other and know those they serve. The need for smallness also demands that purchasers do not keep demanding that each good provider simply does more and more. Instead, purchasers may need to set up a new organisation rather than ask an existing one to expand.

Strategic consumerism

Many of the best organisations today know that to provide excellent services depends upon on being really responsive to the customer, not only responding to expressed desires but “delighting the customer” by working out what they would like even when they do not know they want it. For this reason, private companies will invest in numerous ways of paying attention to what the customer wants and of dreaming up new possibilities. This modern business practice has important lessons for good purchasing; the good purchaser must try and use all avenues to ensure that the voice of the individual is heard. This means using: advocacy strategies, alarm bells and complaints procedures. It means always trying to lift the expectations of those involved and not settling for an expressed desire which may be based on experiences constrained by a limited and segregated past.

However, one important difference between modern business practice and Human Services is that many of the changes that are involved in a new service make demands upon the individual as well as upon the service. A better service is not like some new gadget, simply bringing pleasure, a better service brings pleasure but also new challenges for everyone.

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Sub-contracted purchasing

The changing rules and roles of community care have seemed to make agencies very eager to claim the label “the purchaser” or “the provider” and this anxiety about finding the “right label” might explain the difficulty some agencies have felt about sub-contracting the purchaser role. However, if we understand by “purchaser” a role which is not providing, that is not directly employing staff to fulfil a certain function, then it may well make sense to sub-contract and also let the sub-contractor sub-contract. This will mean that statutory authorities can get the added flexibility of using non-statutory bodies to contract or allowing provider agencies to recruit supports for people in unconventional ways that may suit the individual better; or it may mean sub-contracting the purchasing role to the individual, their family or circle of support.

Technical assistance

Technical Assistance is a term which covers many areas where a provider organisation may need support from staff training, personnel advice, accountancy, legal services or professional therapeutic services. Many service providers do not wish to receive support in these areas from a central service or one specially funded by the purchaser, they would rather have the money to buy such services as and when they need them. However, there may be a role for purchasers here where the necessary infrastructure has not been developed or where provider agencies have other priorities than seeking out sources of advice and support.

Value for money

Many purchasers believe that improving 'value for money' is their central goal. Unfortunately this term is becoming increasingly unhelpful. Purchasers are properly conscious of their role as protectors of the public's money, money that was entrusted to them, in order to subsidise the support offered to people with learning difficulties. However, the danger of the term 'value for money' is that the meaning of value goes unexplored. Improving the term 'value for money' becomes doing the same for less money and the milder idea of 'added value' merely means doing more for the same money. This suggests that there is no controversy about what should be provided or to whom it should be provided.

In the future a better way of clarifying the values of the purchaser would be to abandon 'value for money' and instead to see the purchasers central role as the promotion of quality and equity within a given level of funding. Quality should be understood on a person by person basis. Equity is the requirement that available funding is shared fairly. Equity also requires that money that could go to another in greater need should never be wasted.

Concluding thoughts

At the beginning of the book I claimed that one of the most worrying sights over the last few years has been the constant reorganisation of agencies. This kind of game-playing seems to have become an inevitable part of the life of public agencies. Yet, it is difficult to believe that any of these organisational fixes will really help people with learning difficulties. Instead, I think that we often fall into the trap of replacing the question of what is to be purchased with the question of who purchases.

This situation is a typical symptom of revolutions imposed from above. We sense that our own status is at risk and we try desperately to shore up our position by using the new revolutionary language with extra fervour. Nevertheless, I believe that if we can remind ourselves of our central purpose we can turn our energies away from these organisational manoeuvrings and towards strategies which promote the interests of people with learning difficulties.

To make this change we need a new understanding of purchasing. The danger is that the only feature of purchasing that is grasped is the separation of the purchaser from the provider. In this way purchasing becomes only a new form of planning, or management from on high and the individual's ability to hold services to account is weakened.

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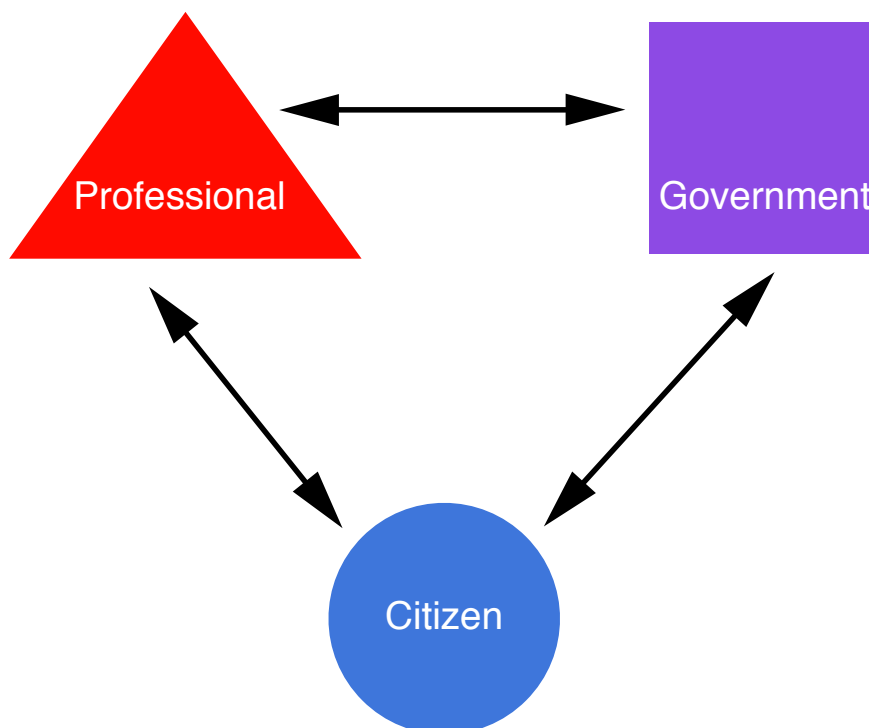


Figure 10 The fundamental transformation

At the heart of the new understanding of purchasing is the need to create a direct relationship between the individual and the purchaser: to create a dynamic triangle of forces between the individual, the purchaser and the provider. Dynamic because each point in the triangle represents legitimate but different perspectives. Great leadership demands finding ways of both harnessing differences and common interests to build a stronger and more inclusive community.

This triangle opens up the possibility of purchasers and providers working with the individual, each other and the wider community in new and unforeseen ways.

This new way of thinking about purchasing can unlock our imaginations and brings new possibilities for strategic action into focus:

- Purchasers can improve the personal power of individuals with learning difficulties; and offer them control over resources, choices, rights to housing and support, information and advocacy.
- Purchasers can operate as an agent of community development investing funds and expertise in the local community; and they can promote the position of people with learning difficulties as members of that community.
- Purchasers can support the development of a responsive market of service provision; and they can encourage providers to stay committed to those they serve and their communities.
- Purchasers can develop partnerships with other agencies; and they can improve the whole regulatory and service environment for people with learning difficulties.
- Purchasers can build new types of organisational relationships, ones which promote trust, flexibility, performance and mutual learning.
- Purchasers can act as a catalyst for the development of the community's image of itself and its vision of its own future.

Of course, these possibilities are not straightforward and some of these ideas will seem vague. This is not surprising for we are at the beginning of a new chapter in the social history of people with learning difficulties. There are no easily identifiable models of behaviour for purchasers and the language of purchasing is young and its meaning can easily become distorted. The only way of learning more about the real meaning of purchasing is to begin to put these new ideas into practice.

However, the best strategy is probably to do so gradually: to encourage pilot projects and avoid grand and elaborate master plans. Learning will be vital. First, we will need to make sure that we learn from those we serve; and this demands that we become involved in the reality of people's lives. Second, we will need to increase the capacity to learn, discuss and be reflective about our work. This means we will all have to learn how to admit to others that we are not sure of ourselves. This is particularly difficult at a time when any seeming insecurity can be leapt upon as weakness.

At the centre of our aspirations must be the idea of the individual with learning difficulties, leading their own life as a full citizen of the community. To provide the individual with all the opportunities to which they are entitled demands that we use our imaginations to transform our own understanding of the role of service organisations: purchasers and providers. If we can achieve this we should also be able to unlock the imagination in a second way; we should be able to help each individual and those they love to imagine fuller and more vital lives for themselves.

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