

Keith Fernett on Big Society, 09 May 2013

In 2006, Anchor House was facing major problems of financial standing, declining buildings, very little by way of policies and procedures, and poor relationships with the local authority. It had stabilised the ship operationally during 2005, and it then set out on what can only be described as a 10 year plan, which ultimately ended up with a document called 'Case for Support' in 2011, for the Home and Hope Appeal to raise £9.3 million. What Anchor House has systematically achieved in the last seven years, and it is now reaching a high point in 2013, is an approach to management planning, execution, evaluation of need and a determination and commitment to achievement within the organisation for its service users and for the local community.

Anchor House has therefore set up a management information system, where everything has been positively vetted, evaluated, monitored, and this again culminated in 2011 in a full blown evaluation for social return on investment to validate all our thoughts to that point. The social return on investment gave clear indication that the direction of travel of Anchor House was the right one, and that we had landed on a path of effective and efficient service delivery.

We believe as an organisation that we have excellent relationships with our service users, our residents, the communities we are located within and many of our partners. Anchor House now has a reach into the community way beyond that of where we started as a homeless charity. We now provide homeless services for 220 people a year, we are establishing a recovery hub for sufferers of alcoholism and substance misuse and we are the integrated offender manager centre for the borough.

We are a partner with the NHS and services for the homeless, migrants, asylum seekers and those who cannot access traditional forms of NHS treatment. We now also run a large community centre, where the health watchdog and domestic violence forum for the borough are based, as well as a dozen community based organisations.

Within the community we have also taken over a therapeutic counselling service and community childcare. In essence, we as an organisation believe that we are a Big Society organisation with reach into all parts of the borough that we exist in for a multiplicity of services, which generally speaking are reaching those most in need, those at the margins of society, those who are workless, homeless, and those suffering from various issues of poor health.

In inducting our programmes and our projects, we have introduced proper and effective management at all parts of the business. We have a very rigid annual planning cycle, culminating in our Annual Budget. We are very good at the execution and delivery of services, and every quarter we produce our Aspirations Programme statistics, both for ourselves and our partner organisations.

Anchor House is based in the second most deprived borough, and we are in its most deprived ward, and the London Borough of Newham is at the wrong end of virtually every statistic for health, wellbeing, employment, education, offending and substance misuse. In respect of Anchor House's commitment, it goes without saying that we are a committed organisation, having won a plethora of national awards and reviews for virtually all aspects of the organisation's business, from financial management, use of technology, health, food, national centre of excellence, best individual trainer in the UK, innovative training award 2013, and it goes on.

We as a charity believe in challenging all our service users to aspire to their highest levels of achievement and as a consequence, we have had some amazing individual achievements, such as apprentice of the year, most outstanding people back into work, our own head of education and planning being the best trainer in the United Kingdom – he was a former homeless resident. 50 people back into work, which was something approaching a 1000% increase over 6 years and high levels of operational performance, which are all monitored in our Aspirations Programme.

So in essence, we are completely community based, our tentacles going outside of our building, with hundreds and hundreds of service users every week coming to our services and those of St Marks that we run. We have also linked our operational work to our Home and Hope Appeal for the regeneration of our large facility where we had a £15 million identified need for building improvements and extensions.

We are now at a point where we have invested £9 million and will be shortly going into the next major phase of investment of £4.5 million. This has been achieved by a fundraising programme that has been wide ranging and got support from many parts of society.

Overall then, I think Anchor House has evidence of excellent, in management, planning and execution, bearing in mind that we are in the most deprived of location and have showed a commitment way beyond what was expected. In essence, we are a social action charity operating a multiplicity of services.