

## Collaborating with the Health System: Opportunities and Challenges for Community Organisations

### Guest Speakers:

- **Kim Shutler**, CEO, The Cellar Trust; VCSE Representative, West Yorkshire ICB
- **Bill Graham**, Community Innovation and Development Lead, Modality Partnership

### Session Highlights

#### *Welcome and Introduction*

The session opened with a poll question: *“What have been your biggest challenges in working with the health system?”*

Common responses revolved around funding, inequality, and operational barriers.

- **Kim Shutler** highlighted funding as the central challenge, amplified by systemic inequality and outdated policies. She called for a shift in mindset and policy direction to enable meaningful change.
- **Bill Graham** agreed, noting that the health system has historically been underfunded and afflicted by misaligned priorities. He stressed the importance of investing in community care and workforce development to address emerging needs.

#### *Opportunities and Challenges for VCSEs*

**Sam** posed the first question to the speakers: *“What are the current opportunities and challenges for community organisations engaging with the health system?”*

- **Bill** identified local neighbourhoods as the key to driving change. He advocated for investing in integrated communities and local health initiatives, where opportunities often remain undeveloped.
- **Kim** echoed this, emphasizing the importance of understanding community needs and reframing existing policies to deliver tangible outcomes. She also called for a workforce strategy that prioritises mental health professionals to meet growing demands.

#### **Structural Barriers:**

- **Bill** pointed to the complexity and fragmentation of the health system, describing GP practices as operating with a “corner shop mentality,” focused on immediate demands rather than broader community engagement.
- **Kim** noted the lack of commissioning for smaller VCSEs and proposed bundling contracts to create collaborative opportunities and sustainability.

## ***Practical Tips for Community Organisations***

Sam asked for actionable advice: “*What practical tips can you give to community organisations engaging with the health system?*”

### **1. Build Relationships:**

- a. **Bill** encouraged organisations to build meaningful connections, even if initial efforts fail. A bottom-up approach fosters understanding and builds trust over time.
- b. **Kim** added that VCSEs need to showcase their value through strategic partnerships with neighbourhood teams.

### **2. Leverage Data and Stories:**

- a. Use robust data and compelling personal stories to demonstrate impact. Kim emphasized that organisations often lack outcome data, which is crucial for making a case for funding and support.

### **3. Adapt to Change:**

- a. Stay informed about evolving local and health system priorities. Flexibility and innovation are critical in addressing systemic issues.

## ***Key Themes Explored***

### **1. Health Inequalities and Underfunded Communities:**

- a. Both speakers stressed that addressing health inequalities must be central to strategic planning. Smaller and racialised organisations often miss out on funding, necessitating a shift towards equitable resource allocation.
- b. Kim proposed analysing spending patterns and fostering collaboration across organisations to ensure smaller VCSEs are not left behind.

### **2. Social Prescribing and Systemic Challenges:**

- a. While social prescribing has potential, its implementation often leaves VCSEs bearing undue burdens without sustainable funding. Bill used the analogy of a travel agency offering a holiday and activities to subscribers and having no one covering covering these costs, highlighting the need for better planning and investment.
- b. Kim recommended focusing on Locality proposed solution (Locality footprints), integrating neighbourhood teams, and advocating for radical shifts in NHS collaboration with community organisations.

### **3. Leadership and Collaboration:**

- a. Both speakers highlighted the need for strong leadership within VCSEs and the health system to drive transformation. Building partnerships rather than

competition between organisations, especially smaller and racialised groups, was highlighted as a key priority.

### ***Audience Q&A Highlights***

#### **1. On Social Prescribing's Sustainability:**

- a. Concerns were raised about "Social Prescribing" being a short-term fix, leaving VCSEs with insufficient resources to support long-term needs.
- b. Bill and Kim agreed that sustainable funding and a clearer understanding of community organisations' roles are necessary to avoid overburdening them.

#### **2. On Addressing Language and Accessibility Barriers:**

- a. Long wait times and communication challenges in the NHS disproportionately affect marginalised communities.
- b. Both speakers called for innovative thinking and equitable resource distribution to tackle these persistent issues.

#### **3. On Supporting Smaller VCSEs:**

- a. Kim pointed out that big contracts often go to large organisations, leaving smaller VCSEs struggling to compete. She recommended analysing spending and advocating for policies that prioritise equitable funding.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Shift the Narrative:** Stop seeing the NHS as an adversary. Focus on finding common ground and building collaborative partnerships.
- **Local Empowerment:** Neighbourhood-based approaches offer the best opportunities for impactful change.
- **Leadership and Vision:** Courageous, creative leadership is essential to address systemic challenges and health inequalities effectively.
- **Data-Driven Advocacy:** Use measurable outcomes and personal stories to make a compelling case for funding and collaboration.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Transforming collaboration between the health system and community organisations requires breaking old systemic ways, championing equity, and nurturing shared goals. While challenges persist, the session highlighted that meaningful change is achievable through local empowerment, strategic partnerships, and a commitment to addressing inequalities head-on.

