

Excellence and Evidence conference

Commissioning for better outcomes



Worksheet 1: Understanding needs

Commissioners seeking to understand the needs of local children face numerous hurdles. Data are collected by numerous health and social care agencies, as well as schools, and the different categories, definitions and thresholds used across the system add complexity to needs assessment activities. For example, routine data are collected by local authorities on children with statements of Special Educational Needs, but this does not reflect the spectrum of disability and is only a weak proxy measure for severity. In addition, information about individuals may be held in care records that are not linked, and even where data might be available, such as through summary health records, it may be difficult to extrapolate and translate individual experiences into population-level estimates needed for effective commissioning.



Imperfect data need not preclude improvements in commissioning, however. Understanding needs is still the starting point for commissioners. Good needs assessments bring together the best available “hard” and “soft” data – quantitative information complemented by experience-based qualitative information from children, young people and their families. Interpreting the data requires a certain degree of technical knowledge and skills in data analysis, along with knowledge of data sources and experience using population statistics and epidemiology to inform decision-making.

The more comprehensive the needs assessment is, the more likely that commissioning practices can:

- Address frustration and misunderstandings for children, young people and their families
- Improve information sharing and communication across Children’s Trust partners
- Improve relationships between commissioners and providers
- Support service planning for population groups and enable personalisation

There are many options for involving children and young people and for encouraging parent participation – not least their active involvement in decisions about their care and support - and commissioners should use these.

“Top tips” for commissioners:

1 Map your data sources, then investigate and interrogate the data

2 Complement your hard data with experience data



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Worksheet 2: Planning/redesign

If the core role of commissioners is to ensure that the resources available are being used in the best possible way to achieve better outcomes, then this part of the commissioning process is where they really make a difference. Commissioners stand outside operational delivery and take an objective view of the extent to which current systems or proposals are likely to achieve what is needed. They need to be able to prompt and facilitate the changes that are necessary to improve outcomes. In that sense, this stage of the commissioning cycle is more about judgement and leadership than data analysis, but ensuring rigour in evidence based decision making is at the heart of the commissioners' role.

With Children's Trusts expected to revise their plans in 2010-11, there is an opportunity to go beyond the minimum requirements and organisational and professional boundaries to consider ways to improve their services. For example, agreeing a common set of indicators that all local agencies have signed up to will allow commissioners to better evaluate the impact of services and also help providers to understand their role within the overall CYPP.



In addition, moving away from traditional service descriptions can encourage innovation in service design, especially if the views of children and parents are captured in earnest.

Understanding what resources are available is essential to accurate planning, and with pressures on public spending by local authorities and in health, getting a good grasp on funding matters even more. Following from a joint commissioning framework and strategy, Children's Trust partners should be able to establish a clearer idea of the resources available from different partners, whether or not ring-fencing is an option. The ability to work with an understanding of what budgets are available can allow multiple partners to jointly address agreed priorities. The joint commissioning framework will clarify who manages the budgets and how investment and disinvestment decisions will be made. Commissioners then have an option to align budgets or to formally join them up through Section 10 or 75 agreements. Knowing the total resources available for children with different levels of need is necessary for completing a RAS (resource assessment), an essential component of the 'In control' and other approaches to personalisation and individual budgets.

The tools relating to cost and benefit measurement of services and interventions across public services are quite process-driven and service-specific, for example, looking only at the direct costs of service provision. However, children may also be receiving support in universal settings, such as at school or nursery. Hence, when calculating costs, and the potential within the whole system, it is important to consider the total resource available.

“Top tips” for commissioners:

1 Understand What Budgets are Available, and Consider Alignment or Joint Budgeting

2 Be prepared to redesign services and bring in new providers if that is what it takes

3 Understand how to design and specify services

4 Involve children, young people and their parents in re-shaping the process



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Worksheet 3: Do

At this point of the commissioning cycle, commissioners are ensuring that data from the needs analysis and all of the ideas for improvement, based on knowledge and judgements about how better outcomes will be achieved is translated into contracts and Service Level Agreements. The commissioner is the carrier of all of that understanding and determination to improve as tenders are written and procurement arrangements agreed.

It is crucial that commissioners understand the market in which they are operating and work with providers to be very clear about their expectations and aspirations. Framework contracts and sub contracting arrangements can be used to encourage and support specialist, new and smaller providers.

One of the most essential elements of the contracting process is its expectations of performance. Commissioners need to go into this part of the process very clear about what they expect, how they will monitor and what the sanctions for poor performance will be.



Where more flexible, outcomes focussed contracts are being used, where providers typically have more autonomy over delivery models, it is essential to maintain an open and honest dialogue throughout the contracting process and even more importantly once contracts have been signed. Provider's information about what is working in terms of interventions or incentives is essential information to commissioners, but should be requested and offered in the spirit of service improvement.

Working in an integrated way requires clear and transparent communication between all organisations and professionals to create a shared vision of services. The requirements of data protection laws should not be seen as prohibiting data sharing, especially where data sharing will improve care outcomes.

Using outcomes as the starting point in the design of tenders and contracts can deliver significant benefits to children and their families. These tenders and contracts are even stronger when they have been designed with all stakeholders as greater buy-in suggests an increased likelihood that the outcomes will be met. It also supports providers in designing services that are closely aligned to the outcomes specified by the Children's Trust. There may be potential for using individual budgets, budget-holding lead professionals or direct payments as part of their overall commissioning strategy. The underlying principles here are commissioning for personalised outcomes, and the co-production of better outcomes with children and their families, often with service users having greater control over how money is spent.

“Top tips” for commissioners:

1 Think about integrated care pathways and empowering individual children, young people and families, so that they can develop their skills and confidence

2 Use Outcomes-Focused Tenders and Contracting

3 Work Jointly with the Third Sector to Shape Services



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Worksheet 4: Review

Commissioning requires evaluation. An outcomes-based approach means that performance management assesses the impact of all activity on the outcomes you set out to achieve. That means understanding much more than the effectiveness of individual services and gauging the impact that commissioned services are having to people's lives and to the wider community. It supports more sophisticated reporting which assesses quality alongside quantity.

What milestones are you setting to support the achievement of locally defined outcomes? And how can you measure them? Seek advice on how to measure outcomes for particular groups of children, young people and families in order to understand what constitute legitimate metrics, and incorporate these outcomes into your commissioning frameworks and contracts. Develop local outcomes for commissioning from multiple perspectives, including those of young people, organisations, parents/carers. Outcomes should also look at the impact across the whole community – not just in health, education or social care. For example, this may include the wider impact and added value of short breaks



Results Based Accountability (RBA) or Outcomes Based Accountability, sometimes also referred to as ‘Turning the Curve’ work developed by Mark Friedman, is fairly widely used by public services. This is a disciplined approach which starts with the end points and works backwards in a step-by-step fashion towards developing the means to deliver these ends. By following a structured set of questions beginning with the quality of life conditions and working backwards towards the actions that would be necessary to bring these about. A Results Based Accountability dialogue would through plain language and effective communication that aims to allow stakeholders and communities to progress quickly from talk to action.

“Top tips” for commissioners:

1 Involve parents and disabled children and young people in the development of an outcomes framework by asking *‘What are the outcomes that matter to you?’*

2 Incorporate outcomes into your commissioning framework and contracts

