

Department for Communities and Local Government – Vision for Intelligent Commissioning in Local Government

A response from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)

August 2009

Introduction

1. The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) is the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector in England. A diverse network of over 170 national voluntary youth organisations and regional and local youth networks, NCVYS has been working since 1936 to raise the profile of youth work, share good practice and influence policy that has an impact on young people and the organisations that support them.
2. The NCVYS network reflects the diverse range of voluntary organisations working with young people at community, local, regional and national level. Most of our members offer opportunities to engage in challenging activities or develop creative talents. They also support young people to become active in their communities and offer opportunities for their voice to be heard. Some offer interventions to prevent or tackle specific issues such as homelessness or offending behaviour. Others offer counselling, advice, guidance and information. All contribute to young people's personal and social development; some also engage with spiritual development.
3. NCVYS welcomes the opportunity to offer a response to the CLG's draft vision on intelligent commissioning in local government, acknowledging that the quality of local commissioning practices impacts significantly on the capacity of many of our members in delivering services to young people and communities.
4. For more information on any element of this paper, please contact NCVYS's Head of Policy and Communications, Faiza Chaudary on T: 020 7278 1041.

1. Making a compelling case for commissioning

The document provides an opportunity to re-assert the long-term goals for commissioning and draws out well how these can have a positive impact on communities and reiterates how crucial it is for commissioning to be effective if these goals are to be achieved. The document demonstrates that these benefits can and should be varied and the concept of cross-fertilisation of outcomes is well conveyed in the discourse of the document in order to highlight the potential for commissioning to deliver a range of outcomes when utilised well.

The 'Why commissioning?' section articulates well the need for delivering intelligent commissioning. It is useful to have the links made between national policy agendas e.g. Every Child Matters and the importance of commissioning in shaping their implementation. This section also acknowledges some of the challenges faced by local authorities in developing intelligent commissioning e.g. high public expectations, management of complex social issues that cut across sector divides and meeting the need to deliver value for money services that meet social objectives at a time of unprecedented economic challenge.

However, to help local agencies understand how to achieve the range of desired outcomes the document needs to more strongly and explicitly state the necessity for partnership working across local agencies as part of commissioning. Whilst this is conveyed in the draft the essential nature of engaging local groups as an integral part of service delivery needs to be more strongly stated and the value of investing in local infrastructure and taking practical steps to communicate the commissioning process to local partners in order to encourage representation and meaningful partnerships needs to be emphasised. Indeed, the potential of the third sector to strengthen communities is being recognised. The Cabinet Office commitment to invest a further £42.5 million in the Third Sector to ensure it can continue to deliver and campaign, demonstrates the continuing importance of a thriving third sector, working in partnership with public agencies for the good of communities. It is therefore imperative that the strength of the sector, particular at times of economic hardship is more strongly communicated in the document to commissioners and local government as a whole.

2. Developing a common vision across local government to drive future developments

Intelligent commissioning is a skill and the document points out that this like any skill needs developing. If commissioning is now centre stage in the achieving of service improvement, transformation, efficiency and supporting local government in delivering many of its role including those related to local leadership, then developing these skills are imperative if commissioning is to be used to its full effect. There are currently programmes underway which are helping in this respect and it would be helpful if the draft were able to point to these to support access to skills development at a local level, for example, the DCSF's Commissioning Support Programme¹. Making these links is also important in order to demonstrate a holistic inter-departmental approach to aid the journey towards more intelligent commissioning.

The section 'how does the commissioning model need to evolve' proposes desired community outcomes to be achieved through intelligent commissioning processes. Whilst it is acknowledged that the purpose of this draft is to set an aspirational vision, it would be helpful to have some more practical pointers here about engaging vulnerable or disengaged groups in local political and participatory structures. The document correctly points out that engaging citizens in these processes will help to inform good commissioning however, doing so practically is a real challenge. Stronger and more explicit guidance here to work closely with local partners including the local voluntary and community sector, faith based groups and private businesses is essential if local authorities are to reach those individuals whose involvement will achieve a step change in local community outcomes.

¹ <http://www.commissioningsupport.org.uk/>

It is correct that Local Government needs to make a shift away from a focus on functions to becoming an enabler, advocate, facilitator and market shaper to secure public interest regardless of who provides the management and funding as set out in section 2.10. However, this is still a radical shift in the thinking of how services are provided and for this to be a reality their needs to be a better understanding across all local sectors about the collective value and diversity of the local market. The voluntary and community sector for example is incredibly diverse and varied in the services it provides and the skills it possesses. Its contribution can and does make a real difference to local services, this diversity needs to be fully understood through good mapping of local provision in order for strategic commissioning to be able to take advantage of local diversity of provision. In addition, the collective value of all services needs to be supported by an inclusive and shared service planning and performance framework that underpins the delivery of core functions, for example health partners will need to see how their contribution to local community priorities through commissioning is also meeting their own organisational and regulatory objectives.

Section 4.5 makes the case for commissioners to view public expenditure as an investment in outcomes with returns judged by results. The section alludes to tangible benefits being achieved, and it is heartening to see preventative measures as an important part of the tangible benefits to be achieved. Whilst it is difficult to measure so-called 'soft' outcomes that are not quantifiable (such as, 'improvement in self esteem', 'increased confidence' or 'at risk groups or individuals diverted from negative outcomes') these need to be more strongly acknowledged as valuable drivers for strong communities. Intelligent commissioning needs to encompass the full range of outcomes being delivered through local services, rather than prioritising those outcomes that are easily measurable.

The vision sets the benefits of good information and analysis of need throughout the document as important pointers towards where resources should be targeted to maximum effect. There perhaps needs to be a stronger acknowledgement that not all services have access to the same information and that there are often very good reasons for this. However, information on key points influencing the commissioning process needs to be more consistently shared across local agencies to facilitate a more strategic and joined up approach to meeting community needs through commissioning. For example, local voluntary and community organisations may not have access to the same level of information and intelligence as statutory partners, in this case it is important to communicate the thinking and drivers for local priority setting to create a shared understanding of how local decisions for funding are driven.

3. Most valuable elements of the vision and areas for further development

We welcome the aspirational nature of the document. It provides a sense of realism and helpfully acknowledges that there is much to do before intelligent commissioning becomes a reality everywhere. This is most demonstrated in figure 7 which clearly sets the direction of travel and outcomes desired for the development of commissioning.

In helping to set this direction, it would be useful to slightly re-order the document so that a definition of the term 'commissioning' is accessible right at the start, helping to set the tone for the document. This can still be somewhat confusing locally based on individual perceptions and professional disciplines. We would recommend that the 'What is commissioning' section should be moved to sit just before the 'Why commissioning' section in the sequence of the document.

The document helpfully challenges some of the unhelpful associations with commissioning as a concept, in particular the concept of commissioning being a replacement for the system of grants. It is helpful that DCLG have used this document to reinforce the original intention that intelligent commissioning should encapsulate and include grants as a purposeful way of funding local activities. Commissioners need to see grants as an important part of their funding 'tool kit' and in some instances more economically viable than commissioning processes.

Grant strategies need to be protected locally and helped to be effective by building them into local commissioning frameworks for key community outcomes as set out in this section. Much more needs to be done centrally for this message to be better understood locally. It would therefore be useful to have a reference in the document which suggests to local authorities that they should ensure the full range of individuals shaping the commissioning process understand this, from commissioning officers themselves to local councillors and Cabinet Members who will take important decisions about the implementation of local public service delivery programmes through annual policy and budget setting frameworks. The local grants forum, an informal network of third sector umbrella bodies, has produced a helpful document entitled *Defending local grants*², which sets out the levers available for continuing the use of grants as a local funding mechanism and would be an important reference point to include in the document.

It would be helpful to see a greater emphasis on the need to assess the impact of reductions of funding to local partners where decommissioning of services is involved. Before such decisions are taken the full value of the service needs to be understood and the impact of reduction to the community considered. Consideration of such implications is inconsistent and needs to be a more dedicated and planned part of local commissioning practice and frameworks.

The need to monitor and ensure accountability through strong review processes and clear local governance arrangements is included in the vision, however a stronger emphasis on the concept of proportionate monitoring, currently being developed by the Office of the Third Sector, would be a valuable inclusion to the vision for intelligent commissioning coupled with sensible monitoring processes.

For more information on any element of this paper, please contact NCVYS's Head of Policy and Communications, Faiza Chaudary, email faiza@ncvys.org.uk or on 020 7278 1041.

² Defending local grants: <http://www.navca.org.uk/stratwork/natpolicy/localgrants/>