

Commissioning and the Coalition – what’s happening?

This briefing aims to present a general picture of the future of commissioning emerging nationally. It outlines the key themes and messages coming from government, the drivers that will impact on commissioning and the implications for local voluntary organisations and community groups.

Public services are in the midst of rapidly changing and complex times. Many factors will affect local commissioning in the next few months and years. Although the Government has provided little detail about the substance and implementation of policies, there are nevertheless emerging key messages and themes about the direction of public services.

Policy direction

Government envisages that voluntary and community organisations will continue to play an important role in the design and delivery of public services. The Queen’s speech stated that the “role of social enterprises, charities and cooperatives in our public services will be enhanced.” A statement from No 10 said that “barriers to involvement will be identified and measures will be implemented”. There is no detail yet about how this will happen. Of continuing major importance for the sector, however, will be how local public bodies carry out their commissioning role and engage with their local voluntary and community sector.

Structures and approaches to commissioning

Commissioning will continue to be in many ways a local political activity, driven by local policies, politics, leadership approaches and competing priorities. Strategic commissioning structures will undergo radical change in the next few years. There is more information about the proposal to shift commissioning functions from primary care trusts to GP consortia on the NAVCA website. The future of local strategic partnerships and children’s trusts is unknown. Nevertheless there seems to be general support for local strategic partnership working to continue in some form and commissioning to be based more on a total place type approach of what a local area needs rather than service silos.

The emphasis on delivering outcomes continues, and related to this voluntary organisations and community groups will need to demonstrate the value and impact of what they do. Government is committed to delivering more personalised services and extending the greater roll-out of personal budgets. Voluntary organisations and community groups will therefore need to engage with both commissioners and service users.

Procurement

Government has made many statements about how smarter procurement processes can help realise cash savings and more collaborative purchasing by public bodies saves money. Although collaborative procurement is mostly used to purchase supplies such as office equipment, the concern is that this 'buy bulk to buy cheaper' approach could leak into the purchasing of services. We are already seeing the re-negotiation of many contracts and organisations that deliver public services will be expected to deliver more for less.

Resources for commissioning

Cuts in public spending are the most significant thing that will affect commissioning in the short term. Commissioners are being urged to 'make the most of a good crisis' to transform and commission truly innovative services instead of simply cutting. Whether there is time and capacity for commissioners to achieve this remains to be seen. Regardless of budgets the re-design of services will remain a high priority to respond to changing demographics and community needs.

An issue that is moving up the agenda is ensuring that commissioners have the skills, knowledge and understanding they need to carry out these complex tasks. The work to draw up a set of National Occupational Standards for commissioners will reach a conclusion soon with their publication. These skills include shaping markets and engaging with community partners. In the current financial situation resource allocation skills and de-commissioning will rise in priority. Even where commissioners already have the full range of skills necessary, public sector cuts will inevitably impact on commissioning capacity.

Implications for voluntary organisations and community groups

Commissioning more innovative services would open up opportunities for voluntary organisations and community groups to demonstrate their ability to meet local needs effectively. The sector will continue to have a role in service design and delivery and its role in de-commissioning will increase. Whether the role of the sector will be as great as policy rhetoric suggests is debateable, and in the current financial situation it's concerning that a lack of resources will be a major barrier. It seems likely that there will be fewer resources to support the local sector in its role in commissioning and de-commissioning other than finance from the new Big Society Bank.

Local organisations will need effective leadership to guide them through the challenging times ahead, the skills to redesign and co-create new service models and the commercial know how to negotiate viable contracts and funding. Partnership approaches to delivering services will be no less important and local support and development organisations will have a role in supporting this. Ensuring strong sector engagement in all stages and levels of commissioning

will continue to be essential for our members, along with making sure that sound information about local developments is available. In these times of great uncertainty, the one thing that's certain is that organisations affected by commissioning will not be able to continue business as usual.

What next

NAVCA will continue to work closely with the Office for Civil Society, Communities and Local Government, Department for Health, Department for Education and other government departments to ensure that the needs of local organisations are understood and embedded in central government policy as it develops. The Local Commissioning and Procurement Unit will continue to provide information, advice, support and services to local support and development organisations. The LCPU minsite contains information about some important forthcoming consultations, training on contracts and the expanded Tender Support Service which will help our members and the sector with funding cuts in the months ahead.

For further information and discussion about matters related to commissioning see www.navca.org.uk/lcpu and ww.navcaboodle.org.uk/group/localcommissioningandprocurement

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