



Strength in numbers

Better commissioning is at the heart of the government's plans to improve the delivery of services in pursuit of improved outcomes for children. LORRAINE O'REILLY from the CSP explains

WHAT DOES COMMISSIONING MEAN FOR SCHOOLS?

Commissioning is one of those words that has been floating around in the public sector for a number of years now without everyone being fully aware of what it is, who does it and what is involved. To tackle the first of those questions, the definition we use in the Commissioning Support Programme is that commissioning is the process for deciding how to use the total resource available for children, young people and their families. That means making best use of everything and everyone to improve outcomes efficiently, effectively and equitably.

Commissioning decisions might be made at local authority level or they might be made by a school or by a group of schools working together.

“ School business managers are crucial to commissioning – making sure resources are used effectively to maximise pupil benefit ”

So commissioning is not simply procurement or buying, it is much more fundamental than that. Quite simply, effective commissioning is making sure that we make the best use of everything at our disposal.

So if that is what commissioning is, who does it? Who is a commissioner? Well, if you are reading this article the chances are that some part of your job is as a commissioner, even if it's quite unlikely that the word appears in your job title. Alongside headteachers and school governing bodies, bursars and school business managers are crucial to the commissioning that schools themselves undertake – making sure that resources are used efficiently and effectively to maximise the benefits to pupils. A sidebar to this article explores some of the fundamental elements of school-based commissioning.

WHY NOW?

There are a number of factors that make it even more urgent that individuals and teams within schools are able to operate as skilled commissioners. Firstly, the national policy direction to give more autonomy to schools

places more responsibility for commissioning decisions in the hands of school-based staff. Secondly, and perhaps even more significantly, the reduction of local authority budgets will potentially reduce the resources available for schools to draw on. School budgets themselves may be safeguarded but other services that pupils use may be reduced or disappear altogether and schools will need to respond to the challenge of ensuring that this does not have a negative impact on pupils' education.

As they respond to these new realities some schools are developing different staffing models with partner schools, which acknowledge the high proportion of school budgets that is spent on staff but also acknowledges that the staff will always be a school's most valuable resource. This

partnership commissioning approach requires a greater level of strategic planning. Schools are already discussing with local authorities how future reduced services will be commissioned. The targeting of more limited resources to meet needs may be of increasing interest to schools – especially those working in areas of greatest challenge. It is also becoming clear that school improvement services will increasingly be commissioned by schools, either individually or in groups, rather than by local authorities.

As schools gain greater freedom to determine how their resources are used, they will need to move away from simple purchasing decisions and adopt a commissioning approach that ensures they are constantly and consistently focused on ensuring best value, whether that be with regard to ICT, school improvement, behaviour support, additional classroom support, sports and leisure activity, the learning environment, and more.

These freedoms, paired with school-based commissioning expertise, opens the possibility that schools will embrace a more innovative range of delivery options and that they will work in a more integrated way with each other and with organisations from the voluntary and private sectors. These sorts of partnerships have already been developed as schools made sure that their pupils could access a full range of extended services but the commissioning approach will need to be extended if schools are to play the full role in a sustainable Big Society.

The efforts of the Commissioning Support Programme have seen us work extensively with headteachers as well as local authority officers responsible for planning the totality of school provision. However, I am also aware that if schools are to operate as truly effective commissioning bodies in the future – and by doing so ensure that every pound spent from the school budget is used to the best possible effect – then an understanding of commissioning principles will be needed by everyone with management responsibilities in schools. ■

THE COMMISSIONING CYCLE

Different parts of government and different local authorities have sometimes used different and confusing descriptions of the commissioning cycle. However, all commissioning cycles contain the four basic stages of understand, plan, do and review.

Understand

Recognise pupils' needs, resources and priorities and agree what the end product should be. This involves gathering the views of pupils and their families so services address their needs. Other providers that the school works with are a key source of information and insight in this phase. Their views of the needs of children, young people and families should be considered, as well as their insight into what types of services may be most appropriate in response.

Plan

Map out and consider different ways of addressing the needs identified. How can they be addressed effectively, efficiently and in a sustainable way? This approach ensures optimal use can be made of available resources, regardless of who invests them. Providers should be involved at this stage to add their expertise to the discussion. How can your school get the most out of available resources by using community provision and volunteers?

Do

Make investment decisions based on the needs and actions identified in the planning stage. These should be underpinned by the views of teachers, support staff and other providers who work with the school, as well as the young people and families who use the service.

Review

Monitor service delivery against the expected outcomes and report how well it is doing against the plan. The review should feed into the next phase of commissioning.

Lorraine O'Reilly is programme director for the Commissioning Support Programme. For more information about commissioning and to access free resources go to www.commissioningsupport.org.uk