

An evaluation of approaches to commissioning young people's services

This small-scale survey examines approaches to the commissioning of services for young people in 12 local authority areas and reports on the experience of national organisations involved in this work.

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Executive summary

Youth services play a key role in young people's educational and social development. As part of the Coalition government's agenda for the reform of public services, local authorities have recently been challenged to review their provision of support for young people. Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 12 local authority areas and also met with representatives from key national organisations involved in this work to evaluate the approaches adopted in commissioning services for young people in local areas and the models of delivery that have resulted. In this context, commissioning is the process for deciding how to use the total resource available for children, young people and parents and carers in order to improve outcomes in the most efficient, effective, equitable and sustainable way.¹

Commissioning had developed at a varied pace within the local authority areas visited. Inspectors judged that five had established systems in place; the remainder were in the process of determining their approach. Only two local authorities systematically managed commissioning as a strategic process that incorporated a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of current arrangements and took into account the full range of alternative providers.

Alternative approaches were not always being considered and poorly informed views among local authorities and providers about the potential of competitors to provide an improved service remained unchallenged. Insufficient consideration had been given to engaging alternative providers from the voluntary and community sector, charities, or other arms of the public sector such as social landlords. Only three local authorities had worked collaboratively with neighbouring authorities to carry out joint commissioning.

Examples were seen where a well-managed approach to commissioning, over a period of time, had contributed to improvement. In the best cases, young people had access to a wider range of provision in their locality which reflected their needs and interests, and specialist services were targeted effectively in supporting those identified as being at risk.

Young people's participation in service design, delivery and monitoring featured in all of the areas visited. Practice was generally good and young people were often able to influence key decisions. The most effective examples provided them with unique opportunities to learn about local democracy, how councils operate and how to represent the views of their peers.

All the local authorities and other organisations visited were working in a challenging financial climate. Most of those visited were planning some reductions in staff, and were also reviewing their role in relation to youth support. In the sample seen, seven

¹ This definition and guidance for local authorities on commissioning can be found in *Achieving Better Outcomes*, Commissioning Support Programme, 2009; www.commissioningsupport.org.uk/resource-bank/essential-reading-list.html.

authorities retained a high level of in-house delivery, four procured services in part from external providers and one was in the process of doing so. However, the effectiveness of these different models depended on how well they were implemented. Creating a culture of shared values, even in a competitive environment, contributed to success.

The posts pivotal to securing commissioning were reducing in number in the local authorities visited. In too many instances the officers assigned to manage a portfolio of youth services work were inexperienced in commissioning processes. Innovative examples of contract design were seldom in evidence. Too few of the local authorities visited had considered the benefits of detailed and open exploratory discussions and co-design of contracts with providers in advance of commissioning decisions.

The most effective local authority performance management and monitoring of youth services displayed a judicious balance of support and challenge. Providers spoke favourably of monitoring which used data to good effect and where knowledgeable local authority officers worked with them to develop their practice. However, overall in the areas visited there was insufficient focus on monitoring young people's achievement and the quality of service providers' practice. The absence of national or regional comparative benchmarks frustrated the attempts of local authorities to measure value for money and impact.

Key findings

- Only five of the 12 local authority areas visited had sufficiently well-established commissioning arrangements for youth services.
- In most cases, local authorities were not giving sufficiently impartial consideration to new providers as part of their commissioning processes, particularly voluntary sector, community and charitable organisations.
- Examples were seen where a well-managed commissioning approach, over a period of time, had provided young people with a greater range of better-targeted activities.
- Creating a collaborative culture of shared values across organisations within a local area is as critical as getting the technical aspects of commissioning correct.
- In the less effective practice, the process of commissioning was poorly understood; confusion between procurement and commissioning impaired planning.
- Structural changes within local authorities in the light of the current financial climate had militated against long-term planning in the areas visited.
- Lack of clarity about the legal and financial implications in relation to liabilities, such as employee pensions, were inhibiting decision-making within the local authorities and providers visited.
- Practice in relation to young people's participation in commissioning activity was often good. The young people involved learned much from this.

- Monitoring arrangements took insufficient account of young people's learning, achievement and progress.

Recommendations

Local authorities should:

- take a lead role in creating a collaborative and shared approach to commissioning
- ensure commissioning is informed by evidence-based judgements
- ensure they give proper consideration to using new providers, including those from the voluntary sector, community and charitable organisations
- ensure a proper role for voluntary, community and charitable organisations in the design, decision-making and monitoring of commissioned services
- recognise the value in maintaining local networks of practitioners and other local organisations.

Introduction

1. In its first year in office the Coalition government signalled its expectations that local authorities divest themselves of many functions. They are expected to commission and adopt new forms of delivery and enterprise and enable individuals and communities to have a greater say and control over services.² With regard to youth services, the government's aim is to refocus state-funded youth services on supporting vulnerable young people.
2. This small-scale survey was commissioned to follow up one of the key findings in the 2010 Ofsted report *Supporting young people: an evaluation of recent reforms in 11 local areas*.³ It reported a shift within these local areas from a traditional position of providing youth services in-house, where externally delivered services had usually been limited, towards a greater focus on commissioning services from a wider range of sources.
3. The 2010 survey found that where such commissioning was being adopted, its progress was slow, even in the areas where services were well structured and managed and where policy and governance arrangements were reasonably well developed. More positively, the 2010 report noted that in the areas visited where commissioning was more advanced, strategic managers were even-handed, objective and alert to the need to maintain support for youth provision

² *Modernising commissioning: increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery*, www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/modernising-commissioning-green-paper.

³ *Supporting young people: an evaluation of recent reforms in 11 local areas* (090226), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/results/090226.

that was well rooted in neighbourhoods. The voluntary and community sectors in these areas were regularly consulted at key points and local authorities recognised their role in developing the capacity of existing and potential local providers.

4. The fieldwork for this follow-up survey took place in markedly different financial circumstances from those that pertained at the time of the 2010 survey visits. The *Spending review 2010* reduced specific DfE funding for services for young people and introduced a non-ring-fenced Early Intervention Grant which gave local authorities full discretion over their resource decisions in relation to youth services.⁴ In November 2010, a National Council for Voluntary Youth Services survey noted that most charities were facing significant cuts to their programmes.⁵ Nearly 70% of the respondents to their survey had seen a drop in income. More recently, a Local Government Association survey of council budgets, spending and savings reported that after central services, the next priority service for cost savings was services for young people.⁶
5. The Coalition government has made its intentions clear: to reduce expenditure while introducing rapid change to the delivery of public services. It does not look to local authorities to provide services exclusively themselves but to enable and facilitate others to do so. There are other national policies which have shaped local responses, including a shift in decision-making towards local communities, sector-led improvement and a diminishing role for national measures and targets, and proposed new funding mechanisms for both local authorities and service providers.
6. However, local authorities still retain strategic responsibilities in relation to youth support.⁷ While all local authorities have a history of grants and contracts with external providers of youth services, very few have ever attempted to externalise the whole of their provision. Some have procured substantial tranches of work from a few providers, while others use small grants to assist a range of youth organisations with core costs or for specific projects. In the sample seen by inspectors for this survey, seven local authorities retained a high level of in-house delivery, four procured services in part from external providers and one was in the process of moving to this model.

⁴ *Spending review 2010*, HM Treasury, 2010; www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend_index.htm.

⁵ *Comprehensive cuts – part 2: taking stock of changes in funding and policies and their impact in the voluntary and community sector*, National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2010; www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?alias=fundingpolicy.

⁶ The *Council budgets, spending and saving survey 2011* was conducted by the Local Government Association in March 2011; www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=17710284.

⁷ *Statutory guidance on section 507b Education Act 1996*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/Statutory%20Guidance%20on%20Positive%20Activities.doc.

7. Indicative of the emerging nature of much of the practice, it was evident to inspectors that terminology differed across the sector. For the purposes of this survey, the following definitions were applied.⁸
 - Commissioning is the process for deciding how to use the total resource available for children, young people and parents and carers in order to improve outcomes in the most efficient, effective, equitable and sustainable way. Provision can be commissioned from within local authorities as well as from external providers, and can be a mix of the two.
 - Procurement is the process of acquiring goods, works or services from providers or suppliers and managing these through to the end of a contract.
 - Contracting is the process of negotiating and agreeing the terms of a contract for services, and ongoing management of the contract including payment and monitoring.
8. Over the period of the survey, January to March 2011, inspectors visited 12 local authority areas where there was prior evidence of established or emerging commissioning structures. These visits enabled inspectors to meet with young people, practitioners, stakeholders and networks of local community-based organisations that were subject to commissioning. Inspectors also visited national charities, national voluntary youth organisations, and infrastructure and charitable organisations representing local youth groups (see Annex). The purpose of these meetings was to gather evidence about any commissioning involvement they had had within the 12 local areas visited, as well as their broader perspective on national commissioning policy and practice.
9. The brief of the survey was to consider:
 - strategies and approaches being adopted to secure youth support and their underlying rationale
 - whether commissioning and procurement ensured that existing effective work was maintained and built on
 - how quality was defined and ensured
 - the role taken by local authorities in nurturing providers and promoting an infrastructure to support commissioning
 - new and emerging delivery models and their state of readiness
 - whether models were beginning to deliver better outcomes for young people.

⁸ These definitions and guidance for local authorities can be found on the Commissioning Support Programme website; www.commissioningsupport.org.uk.

Features of effective commissioning

Strategic leadership

10. All of the local authorities visited were dealing with significant financial pressures. With few exceptions, they were managing actual or prospective staff reductions in their youth services. Their responses to budget pressures ranged from retaining the pattern of provision within a reduced resource to undertaking a more considered exercise that combined some reductions in staff with a review of youth support in line with new policy directions to reform and innovate.
11. Similar tensions were evident among the charitable, voluntary and community organisations visited, which were generally experiencing significant reductions in funding as local authorities and the Coalition government made difficult decisions to prioritise limited resources.
12. Commissioning had developed at a varied pace within the local authority areas visited. Inspectors judged that five had established systems in place; the remainder were in the process of determining their approach. Only in two examples was it managed in a way that involved relevant parties such as councillors, local authority officers, other public bodies, voluntary and community organisations, providers and young people. At its best, it incorporated an assessment of the effectiveness of current arrangements as well as the potential for alternative approaches. However, in too many of the authorities, commissioning was seen narrowly as a procurement exercise. Planning for youth support was often shaped largely by existing organisational and delivery structures in these areas rather than by determining the desired outcomes and critically evaluating the kind of provision that was needed.
13. To bring about improvements and efficiencies, and in light of financial constraints, the more forward-looking local authority areas recognised the centrality of needs assessment to commissioning and strategic planning more widely:
 - drawing on the knowledge and intelligence held by the voluntary and community sector
 - taking a 'whole area' perspective which placed youth support in a wider context
 - planning in relation to agencies such as teenage pregnancy, youth offending and mental health
 - linking planning to the broader areas of housing, social regeneration and health.
14. Examples were seen where a well-managed externally delivered approach, developed over a period of time, had engaged a greater range of providers and in doing so broadened the activities available to young people. Too few of the

local authorities, however, used the experience and expertise within the voluntary and community sector to inform their commissioning strategies.

15. All of the local areas visited sought to target provision, externally or directly provided, on vulnerable young people. However, the interpretation of what constituted 'targeting', particularly in the context of budget reductions, varied. For example, as part of the commissioning process, seven local areas sought to concentrate resources in the more socially deprived areas, indeed one increased the proportion of its overall budget; others managed youth work as a distinct element of an early intervention and preventive strategy by working with specific groups or individuals known to be 'at risk'. The more effective targeted work seen with, for example, young offenders or young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was planned and executed not in isolation, but as part of a broader open-access project aimed at all young people in the locality.
16. Representatives from the voluntary and community sector organisations interviewed expressed frustration that services procured from external providers were being affected harder and earlier than core local authority services. It was apparent that not all local authorities were applying a sufficiently critical analysis to decisions of this nature.
17. In eight of the areas visited, the decommissioning or the cessation of grant aid by local authorities regarding existing services had created tension and, at least temporarily, reduced cooperation among some providers. Few local authorities had reconciled the increased prevalence of competition among organisations bidding for the same sources of local funding with a desire to improve joint planning and dialogue.
18. Posts within two thirds of the local authorities visited, which were pivotal to securing and maximising the potential of commissioning and service management, were reducing in number.
19. A lack of clarity on the part of local authorities and actual or prospective commissioned services about liabilities such as employee pensions and the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) Regulations had tempered progress in commissioning.

Shaping local commissioning – creating a collaborative culture and building capacity

20. Evidence from this survey suggests that securing a future for youth support, beyond that of tightly prescribed targeted services, is more than a matter of commissioning arrangements or delivery models. Creating a culture of shared values across organisations is as critical as getting the technical aspects of commissioning correct.
21. A key strategic challenge for all local authorities visited was to develop a commissioning model which was informed by existing providers who already

formed part of a local network, as well as drawing on local intelligence about alternative providers to plan for new approaches. The need for strong local leadership which embraced change and which created a collaborative culture was more apparent than ever. There was evidence of forward thinking by some local authorities and organisations visited which promoted improvement and cooperation. Examples were seen where local authorities had devoted considerable effort to creating a more open dialogue with providers, the response to which had been positive, as in the following example.

The local authority and its providers developed positive but critical relationships based on mutual interests. The process of commissioning adopted by the local authority encouraged collaboration and the partners themselves, often through their own subcontracting arrangements, had protected very local and small-scale provision, developing the capacity of the smaller providers and maintaining thereby the range and diversity of provision for young people. Given the relatively small budget dedicated to youth work, collaborative working between providers and the local authority enabled them to attract more and varied sources of external funding.

As a result, this way of working had retained small rural youth projects, introduced cross-county initiatives in youth participation and improved the range of training and support available to youth workers.

(Cumbria County Council)

22. Additionally, the most effective operational approaches to commissioning seen during the survey:
- ensured the commissioning process received an appropriate level of local authority professional support
 - nurtured new and different providers
 - enabled established providers to have a role in supporting new or emerging organisations
 - considered the cost efficiency in awarding contracts of a large enough scale and for a long enough period
 - made good use of the knowledge held by existing networks of providers and practitioners
 - tackled adversarial attitudes between organisations where they occurred
 - involved elected members in key decisions
 - were underpinned by robust, intelligent monitoring by the local authority.

An example of an effective approach is illustrated below.

The council introduced a thorough registration scheme for any organisation wanting to receive funding. The registration process included a self-assessment for potential providers and an assessment visit by a local authority officer. Organisations were required to meet a wide range of criteria including for safeguarding, equalities and involving young people in the planning and evaluation of services. Different 'levels' of provider were then established that enabled different levels of funding to be awarded depending on their 'readiness' to deliver. This approach helped nurture and build the confidence of smaller organisations.

(Tower Hamlets Council)

23. Insufficient consideration had been given to engaging alternative providers from the voluntary and community sector, charities, or other arms of the public services. Where successful, it was evident that the practice had developed over a number of years. However, even in those local authorities with good strategic leadership, the concentration on managing reductions and restructuring within short timescales was distracting managers from broader longer-term issues of this nature. Where the engagement of alternative, external providers was occurring, with social landlords for example, youth services were procured to work within estates with a view to reducing anti-social behaviour. In other instances, consideration was being given to the responsibility for local authority buildings being shared with or devolved to other organisations to enable them to strengthen their presence in a local area.
24. Most local areas held regular operational meetings drawing together council, statutory and partner agencies to review and discuss provision in line with local priorities. However, in relation to early stage pre-contract discussions and design, the experience and knowledge of key providers of youth support in local areas was seldom drawn upon.
25. There was evidence of local authority youth services becoming more effectively involved in joint commissioning within local authorities than was the case when Ofsted surveyed integrated youth support in 2009–10. Examples were seen in areas such as learning disability, mental health, substance misuse, missing children services and services for young people not engaged in employment or education. Despite this progress, however, the extent to which external voluntary sector youth organisations were being procured to support this work was limited.
26. Only three local authorities had worked collaboratively with neighbouring authorities, for instance sharing contract specifications and conducting joint commissioning. The few examples seen generally centred on high population areas and conurbations. In one London borough, the 'youth partnership' arrangements enabled the voluntary sector to take a lead in cross-border working by combining staff and working collaboratively to improve provision on

estates. In another example, an experienced national charity was able to support themed youth projects for care leavers or other vulnerable groups across a sub-region.

27. In the local authority areas visited, elected members played an active and supportive role in various aspects of young people's services. They too had been affected by the pace of change and the necessity to take decisions of potentially significant consequence. There were examples of elected members expressing a preference to retain services in-house in the belief that it would increase flexibility of response to new youth issues. Others took a different view and were involved in setting contract specifications and detailed requirements for externally delivered provision.
28. In one example seen, elected members worked effectively and decisively in determining a commissioning model which carried with it an ongoing pension liability for the local authority. The elected members recognised that options existed to externalise the work but had not been provided with sufficient evidence that such options were yet viable. They therefore took an informed decision to retain provision in-house and carry the pension costs, based upon a need to ensure continuity of provision for young people.
29. However, it was evident overall that elected members generally had not been provided with sufficient training and development opportunities to enable them to make sufficiently well-informed decisions about the role of commissioning in the delivery of services.
30. Local authorities have had a long-standing role in developing the capacity of local voluntary and community providers of youth support. Within the local authorities visited, the increased prevalence of commissioning was introducing a new and added dimension to this role. In the best examples seen, local authorities had:
 - provided opportunities for organisations to work together on large-scale youth projects which, in addition to providing for young people, helped 'develop the market'
 - secured business and commercial involvement
 - developed online systems which provided current information about contract opportunities arising in their area, often on a joint cooperative basis
 - communicated the work of small, specialist independent groups to schools, colleges and children's service agencies in areas such as youth arts, supporting young carers, and young people's homelessness
 - where practical, involved voluntary and community sector providers in commissioning decisions
 - facilitated short-term staff secondments and skills exchanges between the local authority and other organisations

- developed good-quality guidance to providers to enable them to be better positioned to win contracts.

31. The following example illustrates some aspects of the approach taken by one of the local authorities visited to building capacity.

The council had worked in close partnership with the Plymouth Theatre Royal for many years to deliver arts education programmes. Building on a detailed needs analysis, the youth service identified gaps in provision for particular groups of young people as well as communities in the city's most disadvantaged areas that had not traditionally accessed what the theatre had to offer. The youth service worked with the theatre's arts development team to design a number of specific projects which it now commissioned. These included 'Young Company Hubs' which took the arts directly to where young people lived, linking young people together and challenging traditional perceptions of the arts world.

In taking part, young people had the opportunity to be 'part of something bigger'. The work was led by professional artists working alongside youth workers and drew on the specific skills of both. Targeted programmes had successfully reached out to young parents and young carers and given them a creative and challenging way to share their experiences with others. Young people had also developed street theatre productions about drugs and alcohol and taken these into local schools. In addition to the work commissioned from the local authority, the arts development team had been able to attract national, regional and local arts funding. Arts organisations from across the city had come together to establish a consortium, 'Wired', which was strengthening collaboration and enabling members to work together confidently and strategically to make the best of increasingly tight resources. The city council continued to play a key role in supporting this capacity-building.

In addition, in 2010 the council developed a summer programme of positive activities for 13–19-year-olds. Some 1,200 young people took part in over 80 courses and activities offered around the city. The programme aimed to raise aspirations and increase young people's participation in learning through an exciting mix of activities and out-of-the-classroom learning.

The local authority's youth service had taken a lead role in supporting existing activity and course providers, and encouraging new ones to join the programme. Each provider was supported to meet an agreed set of quality standards covering health and safety, safeguarding and inclusion. All the successful providers were awarded a contract with the city council which provided a clear specification of requirements but allowed for a high level of flexibility in delivery.

The 'Summer Mix' successfully attracted new providers and the support of local businesses. The programme was overseen by a development team which brought together the key stakeholders, including young people, with representatives of the local authority. A private company is now working with the planning group on a marketing strategy and sponsorship for 2011.

(Plymouth City Council)

32. The more experienced and adept commissioners had, over time, evolved effective ways of involving existing contractors in contract design and service improvement. They had clearly learnt much from previous experience and, having gained more confidence had introduced flexibility within contracts to cope with changing circumstances or particular youth issues, as in the example below.

The local authority, through its Youth Development Group, commissioned services for young people through a wide range of voluntary youth groups based across the city. Action had been taken to build the capability of providers in the local authority's tendering and contract management processes. Providers viewed these processes to be rigorous and fair and were positive about the support and training they received to meet and fulfil contracts. Providers were also clear that commissioning had helped to develop stronger relationships between the city council and the voluntary sector, and had strengthened multi-agency working at local level. A common performance management framework was in place and used effectively by all providers. Its online electronic data-recording system provided regular performance reports which were used to inform planning and evaluation. Recent training provided by the local authority on contract tendering gave organisations a head start in writing applications for regional and national funding.

(Sunderland City Council)

A role for young people

33. In *Supporting young people*, Ofsted noted good and improving practice in the involvement of young people in developing services and decision-making.⁹ The increased focus on commissioning in the local authorities visited for the current survey identified a greater range of opportunities for meaningful engagement with young people. Good examples were seen of young people's participation in service design and delivery in all the survey visits. These provided unique and meaningful opportunities for young people to learn about local democracy, how

⁹ *Supporting young people: an evaluation of recent reforms in 11 local areas* (090226), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/supporting-young-people-evaluation-of-recent-reforms-youth-support-services-11-local-areas.

councils operate and how to represent the views of their peers. They were party, along with officers and elected members, to key decisions about short-listing and interviewing providers, awarding contracts and considering options for decommissioning. Young people's practice in relation to monitoring and evaluating provision was good.

34. There were very few instances where potential providers actually used young people from their respective organisations to present their case to commissioners or 'pitch' for contracts. Local authority officers reported that providers viewed this approach as too risky. However, they also reported that where young people were involved in 'pitching', it added a new and valuable dimension to the process and was very influential in reaching a final decision.
35. The benefits of young people's involvement are illustrated in the following example.

Young people's involvement in commissioning was part of a clear strategic approach to the development of youth services and facilities across the borough. The local authority enabled young people to make a full and confident contribution by providing good support and access to relevant accredited training courses. Groups of young people were recruited to undertake specific pieces of work as well as those who became young advisers and part of ongoing activities and decision-making bodies. The local authority did not shy away from involving young people in potentially difficult decisions where funding had to be reduced due to budget pressures or an organisation did not meet its contractual obligations. The recent re-commissioning of substance misuse services illustrated well how procurement benefits from young people's input at each stage of the commissioning cycle. Focus groups were held with young people to identify need and shape the service specification. Young people visited providers who reached the final tendering stage to talk directly to service users and meet staff. These visits provided a unique insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the different organisations. Young people's feedback to the formal interview panel was based on an agreed scoring matrix. The panel and the young people were confident that the right decisions were made.

(Merton Borough Council)

36. Effective youth participation poses challenges to existing roles and relationships and can expose young people to difficult decisions. In the frequent good examples seen, young people were trained and supported well to carry out these roles. Workers displayed the skills needed to plan the work, assess young people's progress and support their organisation in developing a youth-led culture. All of these measures were however resource-intensive.
37. A wide range of organisational approaches to youth participation were adopted, with all local authorities setting it as a requirement within outsourced work.

However, few had reviewed or evaluated their youth participation policy in the light of new and emerging commissioning arrangements. Examples were seen where the roles of youth participation workers, across the local authority, were insufficiently coordinated with outsourced services. Equally there were examples of creative thinking where external organisations with a good track record in youth participation were commissioned to take a lead role in furthering the work. Their experience was used to provide training for practitioners or young people, to coordinate an area-wide website or to support and link the work of youth councils across a local authority.

Approaches to delivery

38. The most effective operational models in the areas visited reflected local circumstances and priorities, and took account of existing relationships, available resources and geography. The approaches adopted brought different advantages and broadly speaking they had the following characteristics.

In-house services where the local authority retained a major element of youth support delivered by its own staff

39. Seven of the local authorities visited had opted to retain a major element of youth support delivered in this way. Aspects of provision were retained which were high performing or where workers formed an inherent element of children's services multi-disciplinary teams. In these instances, external providers were contracted to meet very specific needs, for example work with sexually exploited young people or substance misuse.

A largely externally delivered youth service model through a mix of local partners

40. An advantage of this approach was the flexibility to quickly procure new providers of youth support such as schools or social landlords. In a largely rural authority this model secured a mix of provision that had a recognisable local pattern based on local determination, but within a broader county-wide offer.

Relatively large-scale independent providers such as Connexions services or local charities providing the majority of youth support

41. These tended to be centrally located in areas of high population. They provided a suite of services such as: counselling; information advice and guidance; youth inclusion programmes; bespoke support for young people who were not in education employment or training; and detached youth work. The advantages of this model were in the concentration of relevant support services on-hand for young people and the capability of such organisations to accommodate large contracts and manage multiple funding streams. A good example of the nature of such work is set out below.

The Challenge and Support Team (CAST) operated as a partnership between Positive Steps Oldham and Greater Manchester Police. A team of

youth workers and police officers worked with schools and in the community to engage young people who were known to, or on the verge of entering, the criminal justice system. Following a violent incident within a school, senior school leaders were given the option of having the police press charges against the young person involved or drawing on the CAST team's restorative justice approach. This involved a 'victim led' face-to-face meeting with the perpetrator and her parents to discuss the personal and human consequences faced by those who suffered in the incident. School leaders initially viewed the idea with scepticism but were subsequently very satisfied with the outcome. They were impressed by how skilfully the police officer, trained in restorative justice techniques, managed the meeting, and by the level of challenge to the young person; parents were required to attend the meeting and the young person was required to carry out some reparation. Ongoing support was then provided by CAST youth workers familiar with the young person and her peers. The social impact of the work included the stabilisation of hitherto fractious relationships between a gang of young people and local schools and improved school attendance.

(Positive Steps Oldham)

Enhanced voluntary and community sector partnerships, often referred to as 'membership organisations' and operating as consortia

42. The constituent organisations in the consortia usually had a shared working history. Various, those visited by inspectors were looking to form trading arms or community interest companies over the longer term.¹⁰ An advantage in this approach was that such partnerships could act as a collective voice for an otherwise disparate sector. In the more forward-thinking instances, such lead organisations had a strong but autonomous strategic role in determining and providing youth provision along with the local authority and were generally representative of the voluntary sector and welcoming of new members. Those membership organisations seen which did not reflect these attributes were considerably less well placed to face the future. Examples are set out below.

A number of voluntary youth, community and faith organisations were quick to recognise that they would be stronger working together than working separately, or even competing for shrinking resources. They identified that they could play a significant role in delivering and shaping services for young people in partnership with public sector services and commissioning bodies. Under the strong strategic leadership of an independent chair, a founding group of 10 organisations established a joint venture company, Surrey Youth Consortium, with the aim of delivering high-quality, value for money local services. The consortium

¹⁰ Community Interest Companies (CICS) are limited companies with special additional features, created for people who want to conduct a business or other activity for community benefit.

published a service strategy in 2010 which included an overview of the company, its assets, the services offered and their impact. Company members are building on their strengths to offer a 'one-stop' solution for commissioners with the aim of simplifying contracting and provision for the public sector.

(Surrey Youth Consortium)

Young Lancashire is a local youth charity and infrastructure organisation, which provides training and professional advice to its extensive network of member organisations. These include specialist community groups, faith organisations, village youth clubs and registered youth charities. Working closely with these groups, Young Lancashire's fieldwork officers were able to focus support and training in a way which built capability, capacity and confidence within the network. Member organisations reported improvement in the way they planned and recorded activities for young people which were fun and had a clear focus on young people's personal and social development. In one example, a group of Asian young men were initially involved in a project as participants in a fitness programme, but little beyond that. Through youth work training provided by Young Lancashire, and the support of the local youth worker, the young men took on a volunteering role for their youth project and were now taking an important role in planning and delivering activities for other young people.

(Lancashire County Council – Young Lancashire)

Externally delivered youth service model through a single national charity

43. The national charities contacted had considerable experience of working with, and developing the resilience of, vulnerable young people in an integrated manner; for example, in the context of family intervention, social care, education and training, homelessness, teenage parents and young people in care. They were able to draw upon their national expertise and knowledge of best practice in delivery. National charities were very accustomed to working within a commissioning framework. In one area visited, the local authority's youth work staff welcomed the sharper focus on vulnerable groups and the opportunities for professional development and training provided by the national charity myplace.¹¹

¹¹ myplace is a government programme delivered by the Big Lottery Fund to create youth facilities across England, including some of the most disadvantaged areas across the country; www.myplacesupport.co.uk.

Public/private developments centred on securing new youth facilities and linked to the national myplace initiative

44. These generally used the myplace building programme as a catalyst and source of capital in stimulating new and additional funding and resources from communities, the private sector, local authorities and patrons. The combination of support through public, private or charitable-trust led arrangements was enabling new, attractive and purpose-built 'Youth Zones' or 'hubs' to be established in selected town centre locations. Facilities included centres for arts, drama, media and music. Some had outreach and mobile provision. Their ambition was to provide accessible and affordable positive activities alongside information, advice and guidance. The groundwork done showed clear potential to support and strengthen local youth provision. Six of the areas visited featured such public, private or charitable-trust led arrangements but building work was often incomplete and only a few centres were operating. One successful example seen by inspectors is described below.

The myplace building programme had acted as a focus and source of capital in stimulating new funding and resources from communities, the private sector and the local authority. Two attractive and purpose-built youth buildings were being established in town centre locations. Partners shared an ambition to provide accessible and affordable positive activities for young people alongside high-quality information, advice and guidance services. The governance and management arrangements of the new buildings were evolving in response to local circumstances: one would be managed by a local charitable trust and the other by a partnership which included the local Football Association club.

(Hertfordshire County Council)

Managing transition

45. It was evident from the visits carried out for this survey that managing partnerships within a period of rapidly diminishing resources placed new and different demands on managers and on relationships. A host of new policy and delivery challenges, including commissioning, were bringing into relief the necessary skills and expertise required of an effective local authority.
46. In too many instances, the officers assigned to manage a portfolio of youth services work were inexperienced in commissioning processes. The more experienced managers typically looked to assess need and then secure a service; the less experienced considered, for example, small-scale grant aid as commissioning and gravitated towards working with a known and established set of providers. They often demonstrated a partial and limited view of the potential of competitors in providing an improved service.
47. The most effective managers ensured that the expertise of staff was fully utilised. Examples were seen where local authority staff roles were redesigned

to areas more akin to the experience of individuals, such as planning for the longer-term sustainability of voluntary and community initiatives or taking on responsibility for contract monitoring. In effective practice, strategic managers ensured that staff had an identifiable contribution to make to wider local authority objectives, by for example drawing on their skills to support or take forward local initiatives such as the strategic coordination of 14–19 education, the development of community capacity or initiatives to promote enterprise and employment for young people. An example from one local authority is described below.

Experienced workers within the youth service, known as ‘advanced practitioners’ played a vital development role in support of key voluntary and community sector organisations dispersed across a large rural county. They worked effectively alongside organisations to lever in additional funding; helped them to access training opportunities, recruit suitable volunteers and network with groups in similar situations; and used the professional and legal services of the local authority to resolve staffing issues. The advanced practitioners were enterprising, professional, and forward-looking, helping the organisations in strengthening their own affairs. Moreover, having managed substantial youth service budget reductions across the county more generally, the approach adopted by the ‘advanced practitioners’ maximised income generation to the benefit of the local organisations and the service more broadly.

(Northumberland County Council)

48. Local authority managers struggled to get the benefits of both the external experience brought by national charities and the local knowledge held by voluntary, community and council services. In some instances, local authority staff and officers were feeling vulnerable as a result of the consequences of employment transfer. It was evident that considerable groundwork was needed to enable both parties to understand their relative approaches, methods, expectations and performance management systems. It was equally evident that when looking to engage external providers, these local authorities needed to involve and consult more widely with the voluntary and community sector in reaching shared solutions about services for young people.
49. Commissioning processes were strengthened where managers and, in appropriate cases, providers, had ready access to the local authority’s procurement, tendering, commissioning, legal, financial and employment expertise. The following is an example of good and timely support.

In order to manage a marked and immediate reduction in the in-year budget, the local authority worked effectively and swiftly with Connexions, the commissioned provider of young people’s information, advice and support. The local authority allocated 10 consultant days to provide additional support to Connexions in looking at how to maximise the reduced resources available. There was a clear focus on doing things

differently rather than doing the same with less. Managers and front-line staff were fully involved in developing ideas and were positive about their input to the new strategies. Efficiencies were achieved promptly, while minimising the impact on the quality and range of front-line services. Changes included the way in which data were collected, when Connexions centres were open for young people, and when action plans were produced. Identifying and implementing new ways of working helped staff and managers to think critically about their wider day-to-day business.

(Buckinghamshire County Council and Connexions)

50. The range of views expressed by the local authorities and providers visited about the constraints placed on them by national and European guidance in respect of procurement and contracting was both striking and contradictory. In some instances, providers contested local authorities' interpretation of European procurement guidance which is often pivotal to the awarding of contracts. Many of these differences in interpretation centred on employment issues such as pension liabilities and TUPE rights, but also on contract design, tendering and procurement. Mechanisms were lacking, locally, regionally or nationally, to resolve these differences and to share good practice.
51. More widely, there were examples of organisations seeking to attract corporate funding. Smaller voluntary and community organisations promoting this approach in the areas visited seldom had the capability and available resources to do so effectively.
52. Within the local authority areas visited there was limited evidence of approaches such as staff cooperatives, mutuals or social enterprises.¹² The few seen by inspectors across the sample had mostly been in existence for some time and had been formed from voluntary sector organisations seeking more commercial ways of operating over the longer term. There were indications however of new developments, for example in relation to the future running of outdoor education centres or securing the delivery of counselling services across an area. The voluntary and community sector consortia visited were each exploring how to develop their business and enterprise expertise with a view to securing future contracts themselves as well as providing professional guidance to their constituent members.

Performance monitoring and evidence of impact

53. Examples were seen of effective approaches to monitoring the performance of providers but, overall, these were not the norm. The most effective approaches

¹² Mutuals are businesses that are owned by their members. They can operate as employee owned, as cooperatives or as wider social enterprises. Social enterprises are businesses or services with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the community. Cooperatives are businesses that are fully or majority owned by their members – who may be employees, consumers, others in the community or a mix of these.

were managed in an intelligent and informed manner and helped instil confidence in the system among providers. Effective monitoring:

- focused on young people's achievement
- was sensitive to the varied contexts within which organisations worked
- operated on the premise that most providers were well placed to report on their own progress, provided that criteria were clear and transparent
- took account of 'user views'
- used the performance management knowledge and expertise which providers themselves could bring
- drew on locally derived performance indicators
- required the collection and submission of appropriate data, without being unduly onerous, which were routinely analysed
- was alert to jointly identified risks of falling short of targets; subsequent monitoring visits were proportionate to that risk
- resulted in performance reports routinely submitted to the cabinet of the council to inform its decisions.

54. In the weaker examples, service-wide numeric targets were replicated at local level without a clear rationale; data-monitoring expectations were unreasonable and not commensurate with the size of the contract; and officers applied an overly punitive approach, within which monitoring in practice was interpreted as compliance as opposed to development. In such examples, local authorities had failed to apply a 'lighter touch' to those providers with good track records. Even where providers were performing well, few local authorities had actively and critically reviewed the most effective use of central resources dedicated to monitoring.
55. In the local authority areas visited there was less focus on young people's achievement, the quality of practice, comparative measures or national indicators than when Ofsted last surveyed provision in 2009–10. Most were developing internal targets and measures of quality often building upon previous nationally applied benchmarks. The absence of national or regional comparative benchmarks however frustrated their attempts to measure value for money and impact.
56. In three of the local authorities, past investment in a single shared management information system used by all contracted services proved useful and encouraged a more consistent approach to data monitoring. Notwithstanding conflict of interest issues, it was clear to inspectors that, in the right instances, opportunities existed for commissioned providers to monitor each other's work.
57. In terms of promoting young people's learning and achievement, most of the monitoring arrangements observed relied exclusively on data or accreditation

targets. A few local authorities, however, also monitored young people's progress and learning using case studies and other illustrative techniques. They shared good practice across providers. Invariably such a focus on curricula tied up resources but there was evidence that it supported front-line practice and the quality of young people's experiences.

58. Good examples were seen of jointly agreed and locally created performance measures covering aspects such as community benefit, young people's learning, sustainability of projects and integration. The following provides an example.

Good partnership work between the local authority and Cross-Herts Community Counselling (CHeCC) helped to ensure that young people had access to specialist youth counselling services which were close to where they lived and young-people friendly. Historically, the quality of provision was variable and coverage was patchy. CHeCC was specifically set up to establish a 'virtual support structure' for the diverse range of community-based organisations that offered youth counselling. Over the last two years these providers had worked together to implement common quality standards for youth counselling based on agreed principles of practice. A cost-benefit analysis was undertaken to ensure that good value for money was obtained for services provided. Young people were involved in monitoring and evaluation. A common performance management framework was also agreed which met the needs of providers as well as the commissioner. This collaborative approach helped to improve the consistency of services while maintaining the individuality and strengths of each provider.

(Cross-Herts Community Counselling)

59. The most effective monitoring displayed a judicious balance of support and challenge. Providers spoke favourably of contract management which was visible, local and where knowledgeable local authority officers 'solved contract problems prior to needing central involvement'. In a few instances, this role also acted as a wider link into children's services departments. There were clear advantages to this approach with providers and the local authority better able to take a more holistic approach in relevant areas such as family support and intervention, assessment and referral of young people, school attendance and sources of funding. Opportunities were, however, being lost to draw upon the performance management, knowledge and experience which providers themselves could bring.
60. Four of the authorities visited had long-standing externally delivered arrangements in place and had garnered considerable experience over the years. Each was keen to point out that mistakes had been made in the past, but the challenge had been to learn along the way. In all of these authorities, improvements were made to the provision of services for young people because of a combination of management factors, not solely because of commissioning.

61. Examples were seen within previously underperforming local authority youth services where a well-managed commissioning approach, over a period, had contributed to improvement, cooperation, variety and a more secure planning framework than had existed hitherto. Examples were also seen where long-established commissioning arrangements had strengthened the work of local organisations, drawn on the local authorities' own areas of expertise and broadened the reach of youth support. The following example illustrates a relatively sophisticated model which has been highly effective in meeting the needs of young people.

The local authority had a clear strategic approach to commissioning. The council showed that it was prepared to de-commission services and bring in new providers where performance was not good enough or providing value for money. Tendering opportunities were well publicised and reflected the local authority's open mind as to who was best placed to deliver youth work in the borough. There were now five main providers: two registered social landlords and three secondary schools. These in turn subcontracted work to over 80 smaller organisations. A sixth strand of youth work, through the arts and targeted programmes was provided directly by the local authority. This flexible mixed economy enabled the local authority to make best use of resources and to be responsive to the changing needs of young people.

(Tower Hamlets Council)

Notes

Over the period of the survey, January to March 2011, inspectors visited 12 local authority areas chosen to feature urban and rural settings and where there was prior evidence of established or emerging commissioning structures. In addition, two visits were made to voluntary and community sector partnerships operating as consortia in part of a local authority area and to two major independent commissioned providers. Inspectors also carried out round-table meetings with national charities, national voluntary youth organisations, and infrastructure and charitable organisations representing local youth groups (see Annex). The purpose of these meetings was to gather evidence about any commissioning involvement that they had within the 12 local authority areas visited, as well as their perspective more broadly on national commissioning policy and practice.

Survey visits to the local authority areas spanned one or two days. They enabled inspectors to meet with young people, practitioners, stakeholders and networks of local community-based organisations which were subject to commissioning. The issues explored included: commissioning and procurement; quality; the role taken by local authorities in nurturing providers; and the overall impact of commissioning. Documentation scrutinised by inspectors included contracts and monitoring information, records and case studies of young people's achievement and relevant local data.

Further information

Publications by Ofsted

Supporting young people: an evaluation of recent reforms to youth support services in 11 local areas (090226), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/supporting-young-people-evaluation-of-recent-reforms-youth-support-services-11-local-areas.

Engaging young people: local authority youth work 2005–08 (080141), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/engaging-young-people-local-authority-youth-work-2005-08.

Moving through the system – information advice and guidance (080273), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/moving-through-system-information-advice-and-guidance.

Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training: what works and why (090236), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/reducing-numbers-of-young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-what-works-and-why.

Other publications

Modernising commissioning: increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery, Cabinet Office, 2010; www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/modernising-commissioning-green-paper.

Achieving better outcomes: commissioning in children's services, Commissioning Support Programme, 2009; www.commissioningsupport.org.uk/resource-bank/essential-reading-list.html.

Positive for youth summit, Department for Education, 2011; www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/youngpeople/a0075356/positive-for-youth-summit.

Joint planning and commissioning framework for children, young people and maternity services, Department for Education, 2006; <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/EarlyYearseducationandchildcare/Page9/ecm-joint-framework>.

Integrated commissioning for children's services: a practical guide to the development of simple commissioning frameworks and clear structures for children's services authorities, Office for Public Management, 2007; www.opm.co.uk/resources/3.

Websites

Department for Education; www.education.gov.uk.

National Youth Agency; www.nya.org.uk.

Commissioning Support Programme; www.commissioningsupport.org.uk.

Children's Workforce Development Council; www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/young-peoples-workforce.

Annex: Survey visits and meetings

Local authority hosted area visits

Bath and North East Somerset
Buckinghamshire
Cumbria
Halton
Hertfordshire
Leeds
Merton
Northumberland
Plymouth
Sunderland
Surrey
Tower Hamlets

Voluntary and community sector partnerships

Surrey Youth Focus
Young Lancashire

Major providers

Positive Steps Oldham
The Zone Plymouth

National charities and public/private providers

Action for Children
Barnardo's*
Carlisle Youth Zone
Catch 22
Clubs for Young People
National Council for Voluntary Youth Services
OnSide North West
Partnership for Young London
Rathbone
Substance
UK Youth
The Young Foundation*

* Telephone interviews.