

Report summary

An evaluation of approaches to commissioning young people's services

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.

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 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.

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