

## **THIRD SECTOR COMMISSIONING AND ENGLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT**

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### **Abstract**

An exploratory paper considering third sector commissioning policy commitments, namely, the Compact, the Small Business Friendly Concordat, and the eight principles of good commissioning; and their relevance to English local government procurement. The conclusion is that there is confusion regarding the differences between commissioning and procurement; and, a lack of embedding the policy commitments, in procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management.

**Key words:** third sector commissioning, public procurement, public policy implementation.

### **Introduction**

Commissioning, of which procurement is only a part (Walker, 2007, p. 32, Murray, 2009), has now become an important term in the lexicon of UK public policy. This has been paralleled with a commitment to greater involvement of the third sector in commissioning (Cabinet Office, 2006). Third sector involvement is beyond that of being a potential provider and includes active participation in designing, shaping and calling public service delivery to account.

So far there has been a gap in public procurement research relating to third sector commissioning and its implications for procurement; this paper provides a foundation of exploratory research.

The paper's contribution is cataloguing policy commitments which relate to English local government procurement, namely, the Compact Code of Good Practice for Funding and Procurement (Commission for the Compact, 2003), Small Business Friendly Concordat (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005), and the eight principles of good commissioning (Cabinet Office, 2006, paragraph 30). Then building on that foundation, makes use of explorative research which suggests confusion amongst practitioners regarding the differences between commissioning and procurement, and a lack of embedding the policy commitments in procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management. The indications are, if these findings can be generalised, that there is still a considerable distance to go before procurement practice reflects public procurement policy.

From an international perspective, the UK Government has now agreed to champion the idea of a European Compact. While France and Sweden have their own Compacts (Jump, 2008), this paper is confined to the English Compact although some of the findings may be equally applicable to France and Sweden. Others may find the cataloguing of English procurement initiatives of use in developing their own policies and strategies; that being the case, the indicative lessons of transferring policy to practice are also worth considering.

The paper provides a policy backdrop and explains commissioning, prior to discussing the potential implications for procurement managers.

### **What are commissioning and the commissioning cycle?**

Murray (2009) discussed the difference between procurement and commissioning, insofar as it is presented within UK public policy and commissioning frameworks. The key themes of those frameworks represent a commissioning cycle, generalised as: a strategic needs assessment; deciding priorities and outcomes; planning and designing services; options appraisal; sourcing; delivery; and, monitoring and review. This contrasts with the National Procurement Strategy (NPS) (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister/Local Government Association, 2003, p. 17) narrower definition of procurement, namely,

'procurement' is the process of acquiring goods, works and services, covering both acquisition from third parties and from in-house providers. This process spans the whole cycle from identification of the needs, through to the end of a services contracts or the end of the useful life of an asset. It involves options appraisal and the critical 'make or buy' decision which may result in the provision of services in-house in appropriate circumstances.

Therefore commissioning encompasses procurement, but also embraces, the pre-procurement, strategic needs assessment, deciding priorities and outcomes, and, planning and designing services; together with the post-procurement, review of the service delivered and its effectiveness in achieving the agreed outcomes.

The 2006 Local Government White Paper, referred to local government as "*a strategic leader and place shaper*"; commissioning falls within that 'place shaping' role. The view is that English local councils lead the commissioning cycle and are responsible for its effectiveness, in doing so they work with other partners, including the third sector.

The next section of the paper further explains what is meant by the third sector, their potential contribution to the commissioning process and what is meant by 'involvement' in commissioning.

### **Who are the third sector and what is meant by greater involvement?**

Kelly (2007, pp. 1004-1008) provides a comprehensive discussion on the problem of defining the third sector but, for the purpose of this paper, the UK Government definition is used of the third sector encompassing all organisations which are non-governmental, principally reinvest surpluses in the community or organisation, and seek to deliver social or environmental benefits. The sector embraces voluntary and community organisations, charities, social enterprises, mutuals and co-operatives (HMT, 2005).

While some view involvement of the third sector narrowly, as a provider/agent (for example, Lekhi and Blaug, 2007; Carmel and Harlock, 2008), it is more often generalised under two different roles, the advocacy role and separately being one of a range of potential providers (Blackmore, 2005, pp. 12-18; Kelly, 2007, p 1009). The advocacy role is concerned with designing, shaping and calling public services delivery to account; the pre- and post- procurement phases of the commissioning cycle. The provider role is concerned with the procurement phase.

The rationale for greater involvement of the third sector is a number of perceived benefits they can offer public services commissioning, namely, specialist knowledge of clients needs, expertise and/or skills; independence from existing models of service; ability to spot emerging needs within communities; ability to develop innovative solutions, ability to reach groups that government can't reach; freedom and flexibility from institutional pressures; particular ways of

involving people in service delivery; and ability to monitor and evaluate quality of service delivery (Cabinet Office, 2006; Kelly, 2007, pp. 1010-1012; Tanner, 2007). The third sector, therefore could usefully contribute, in a pre-procurement advocacy role, in strategic needs assessment, prioritisation of outcomes and, planning and design of services. They may also opt to be a potential provider of public services during the procurement phase. Then have a major advocacy contribution in the monitoring and review of the services delivered, and calling the public sector to account.

Having said that, the National Audit Office (2005) highlighted obstacles to greater involvement of the third sector, during the procurement phase of commissioning, namely, short-term contracts which make it difficult to recruit, retain and develop staff and access capital; placing excessive risk on providers, causing some organisations to reject opportunities to deliver services; unrealistic prices; and excessive burden of monitoring and evaluation which diverts resources away from front-line service delivery.

Chapman, *et al* (2008, p. 11) suggest that, within North East England, 23% of third sector organisations claim to have the capacity and capability to undertake contracts but are not bidding due to perceived barriers (assumed to be those identified by the NAO) in the tendering process, and, a further 10% don't feel they have the necessary capability and capacity to bid. It can therefore be implied, if Chapman, *et al*'s findings can be generalised nationally, there is a sizable competitive market capacity which is not being harnessed. If that is true there is an economic justification for removal of the perceived barriers and building the capacity of the third sector supply base.

### **Overcoming the obstacles to greater third sector involvement in commissioning**

While not the focus of this paper, others (for example, Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002, p. 55; Kelly, 2007, pp. 1014-1019) suggest third sector organisations may be reluctant to have greater involvement in commissioning due to risk of, or perceived, loss of independence and corrosion of their core values. Indeed Chapman, *et al*, (2008, pp. 6-11) concluded that approximately 40% of smaller third sector organisations and 30% across the spectrum, consider tendering to be contrary to their core values. Removal of those barriers is not within the gift of the public sector, although some steps have been taken to remove public procurement related barriers, specifically through commitment to the Compact, Small Business Friendly Concordat and the eight principles of good commissioning.

The National Procurement Strategy (NPS) for Local Government (ODPM/LGA 2003, p. 49) stated that English councils should develop a local compact with the [third] sector which includes protocols for grant funding and contracts, sign up to a 'concordat for small and medium sized enterprises which would include many third sector organisations, develop supply chain partnership with the [third] sector and develop the market through, for example, working with the [third] sector.

The next section of the paper looks at the three policy commitments in more detail.

### *The Compact Funding and Procurement Code of Good Practice<sup>1</sup>*

In 1998 central government and the third sector entered into an agreement to improve their relationship, The Compact (Home Office, 1998). The Compact applies to English central government, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland having their own Compacts (see Morrison, 2000, for a comparative study of the various Compacts). 100% of English county and single tier councils now have local compacts (Commission for the Compact, 2008).

Marks (2007, p. 143) illustrated that there is often a gap between an organisation's commitment to a local compact and ensuring that all those who need to know about that commitment are aware of it, and, as a result, concluded that while generally perceived as a good thing, there is little evidence of impact locally.

Subsequent to the Compact, five codes were developed. From then reference to the Compact meant not only the overarching Compact but also the family of codes. However, each local compact, given the flexibility offered to local councils in the development of local compacts one cannot be certain that all aspects of the national Compact are replicated in local compacts, but it is safe to make a working assumption, for the purpose of this research, that the salient core aspects are addressed within the local compacts.

The Funding Code was agreed in 2000, which was replaced by a Compact Code of Good Practice for Funding and Procurement (Commission for the Compact, 2003). The Funding and Procurement Code's Principles include undertakings that the government will:

- Recognise it is legitimate for third sector organisations to include the relevant element of overhead costs in their estimates for providing a particular service;
- Avoid seeking information about management fees and overheads;
- Make payments in advance of expenditure, where appropriate, and necessary, in order to achieve better value for money;
- Implement longer-term funding arrangements where this represents good value for money [this has subsequently been developed further (Cabinet Office (2006, p. 24) advocating that three-year funding should become the norm];
- Be proportionate in monitoring requirements;
- Give enough notice of the end of grants or contracts.

Breaches of the Compact are monitored by the Compact Advocacy Programme. In 2007, 89% of alleged Compact breaches related to the Funding and Procurement Code.

### *The Small Business Friendly Concordat*

In 2005 the Local Government Association, Department for Transport and Industry (DTI) and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published the Small Business Friendly Concordat (ODPM, 2005). It is reported that 65% of English councils have subsequently adopted the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Compact* was refreshed in December 2009. The Code was incorporated and the main change a reduction from 30 days to 10 days for payment of invoices.

Concordat (CLG, 2008, p. 6). The Concordat is not only applicable to SMEs but also to the third sector (ODPM, 2005, p. 7). Directly relevant commitments include:

- That the approach to individual contracts, including large contracts and framework arrangements, etc., is supported by a sound business case and options appraisal;
- Keeping the tender process simple in order to help minimise costs to suppliers;
- Paying suppliers on time - no more than 30 days from receipt of an undisputed invoice;
- Ensuring all contracts require the council's suppliers to pay their sub-contractors, throughout the supply chain, within 30 days from receipt of an undisputed invoice.

### *The Eight Principles of Good Commissioning*

The UK government, in parallel with the development of commissioning frameworks, adopted eight principles of good commissioning (Cabinet Office, 2006, para. 30), namely,

1. Understand the needs of users and other communities by ensuring that, alongside other consultees, they engage with the third sector organisations, as advocates, to access their specialist knowledge;
2. Consult potential provider organisations, including those from the third sector and local experts, well in advance of commissioning new services, working with them to set priority outcomes for that service;
3. Outcomes for users are at the heart of the strategic planning process;
4. Map the fullest practical range of providers with a view to understanding the contribution they could make to delivering those outcomes;
5. Consider investing in the capacity of the provider base, particularly those working with hard-to-reach groups;
6. Ensure contracting processes are transparent and fair, facilitating the involvement of the broadest range of suppliers, including considering sub-contracting and consortia building, where appropriate;
7. Seek to ensure long-term contracts and risk sharing, wherever appropriate, as ways of achieving efficiency and effectiveness; and
8. Seek feedback from service users, communities and providers in order to review the effectiveness of the commissioning process in meeting local needs.

### **Change Management**

Public procurement emerges as a consistent theme around which the policy commitments converge and is identified as one of the key areas which need to change if the benefits of greater involvement of the third sector in commissioning are to be realised. To bring about that change procurement managers will require a good understanding of the difference between procurement and commissioning, a good understanding of the policy commitments and their implications for procurement, and embed those commitments. However, Ferlie, *et al.*, (2003, p. S7) have highlighted that there are "... severe difficulties associated with the introduction of new ways of



*working in the public sector ...*”, so one cannot assume rhetoric will be followed by implementation and embedding in practice.

The commitments can however be viewed as change management tools, setting out a desired state which public procurement should move to.

In his seminal work on change management, Lewin (1938 and 1951) argued that effective change management requires a strategy which ‘unfreezes’ the current state of behaviour so that it can accept change; make the desired change, and then, ‘refreezing’ or stabilizing the system so that a new form of behaviour becomes embedded as the norm.

In addition effective performance measurement helps both the organisation and the individual understand what is involved in the desired change (Moran and Avergun, 1997).

It can therefore be implied that, if the desired policy change is to take place, there is a need to embed the policy commitments in procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management.

The next section explains how explorative research was used to provide insights on the extent to which the desired policy change had taken place.

### **Research approach**

This paper is explorative and seeks to consider the response of English local government procurement in county and single tier councils to respond to the third sector commissioning agenda. Exploratory research is rarely conclusive, rather than testing or confirming a hypothesis, it provides insights suitable for subsequent more rigorous investigation (Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p.10). The findings suggest what may be reality but need to be with the caveat of the limitations of the research approach.

A web-based survey was used issued through inclusion in an email newsletter to all Society of Procurement Officers in local government (SOPO) members during October and November 2008. The survey was first included in a special Newsletter on the 20<sup>th</sup> October; reminders were included in subsequent eNewsletters sent on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 30<sup>th</sup> October, and 13<sup>th</sup> November. SOPO also have an electronic discussion forum and a request for participation was placed on the discussion forum on the 24<sup>th</sup> October. The survey was closed on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 2008.

At face value this approach was considered likely to have produced a good response rate. However, it appeared responses were generally only received during a four hour window after receipt of the newsletter. With hindsight, the use of an eNewsletter did not seem to be an effective research tool.

The exact numbers of those who received the e-Newsletter could not be ascertained but was estimated to be in the region of 3,000 practitioners, of which only 150 could be considered lead practitioners in English county and single tier councils. It is also difficult to target those directly involved in local government procurement decision-making, therefore, although a total of 72 usable response was received, the survey, while enabling respondents to remain anonymous provided a basis to disaggregate, categorise responses and estimate response rates (Table 1). Assuming that each council can only have one lead procurement practitioner, in total 18 usable responses were received from the target group, therefore a response rate of 12%, of which a disproportionate number were London Boroughs.

Given the small response base there are limitations on how robust the research findings may be or indeed the potential level of statistical analysis. However, the findings are instructive as they reflect the practice of some significant English local government procurement lead practitioners. Descriptive statistics are used.

The research questions pursued are:

Do procurement managers view procurement and commissioning as different?

What is the level of awareness of the policy commitments?

Are the policy commitments regarding third sector commissioning embedded in procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management?

## Findings

### *Understanding of the differences between commissioning and procurement*

53% of procurement leads considered procurement and commissioning to be just different names for the same thing, with 47% viewing them as different. Recognising that procurement and commissioning are different does not mean that respondents correctly identify the differences, for example, one respondent, quoted below, considered commissioning to be a sub-process of procurement as opposed to vice versa. Illustrative comments volunteered demonstrate the wide variance and strength of opinions:

*Commissioning is fundamentally about specifying the services/outcomes desired. Procurement is fundamentally about ensuring that those services/outcomes are delivered. Purchasing is a key part of the procurement but only one part of a process that begins before and ends after the purchase of services.*

*I personally believe there is a significant difference between strategic commissioning and service based commissioning even if it is of strategic significance. Strategic Procurement that takes a holistic approach to assessing need and reviewing the make or buy options is very similar to commissioning....*

*They are the same if procurement is defined as the process from identification of need through to disposal of asset or decommissioning of service. Commissioning focuses on the identification of need.*

*Commissioning and purchasing are both aspects of procurement. They are not the same process - each has its own processes within the overall procurement framework. The aims are the same - making an effective contribution to better service delivery.*

*It's not helpful to have different phrases for what essentially are the same process, yes in reality there are differences but not significant enough to warrant a 'my approach is better than yours' attitude.*

*My qualification is 'purchase and supply' it's the government that seem to need to waste time and money faffing with different names.*

Having said that, 14 (93.3%) felt there was a need for their organisation to change in order to maximise the potential of the third sector in public services commissioning.

### *Awareness and embedding of the policy commitments*

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of embedding the commitments within procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management; although the questionnaire allowed respondents to select multiple answers, only two respondents selected more than one option with regard to the Compact Code, three in regard to the Concordat and none selected more than one option with regard to the eight principles (although this may be a weakness in the survey design, when the pilot was tested this did not appear to be a problem). The key findings are set out in Table 2.

A comparatively small number of the lead practitioners appear unaware of the commitments and most respondents claim to have a working awareness of them. However, embedding the commitments into change management tools, for example, procurement policy, procurement strategy, procurement procedures and procurement performance management appears lacking. Only 6 (35%) of the respondents had embedded the Compact Code and the Concordat in procurement strategy, and only one had embedded the eight principles into procurement strategy. Also significant is that only one respondent had embedded the Compact Code and eight principles into performance management; two had embedded the Concordat in performance management.

### **Discussion**

The UK government have made significant commitment to third sector commissioning with a view to improving public services delivery. Obstacles to greater involvement of the third sector in commissioning have been identified (National Audit Office, 2005) and policy commitments made to assist overcoming those barriers, namely, the Compact, the Small Business Friendly Concordat and the adoption of the eight principles of good commissioning, all of which are directly relevant to public procurement. Turning Compact rhetoric into action has already been expressed as a cause for concern (Marks, 2007, p. 143). Failure to honour policy commitments could compromise public sector integrity and ability to further improve public service delivery.

This exploratory research indicates that some lead procurement practitioners do not understand the differences between commissioning and procurement as portrayed in UK public policy.

Those participating in the research recognise the need for procuring organisations to change in order to maximise the potential of the third sector to improve public services delivery. A good starting point would be the embedding of the existing policy commitments into policy, strategy, procedures and performance management. The research did not probe why there was an absence of embedding the commitments. Although those participating in the research were comparatively senior managers, it may well be that they lack the skills to act as change agents. Alternatively, it could be that even though they have policy awareness and recognise the need for change, they do not necessarily have the desire and conviction to drive the change. Chapman, *et al's* (2008) work and that of the NAO suggests the barriers are deterring third sector organisations from engagement with the public sector, the onus is surely on the public sector to make the changes, assuming they had a role in developing the policy commitments, which seems logical, at least with local compacts and the option of adopting the Concordat.

Ferlie, *et al.*, (2003, p. S7) cautioned about the difficulties of translating policy into practice. Even when there is claimed to be a working level of awareness, the findings suggest that is not



transferred into embedding; indeed Table 2 suggests a lack of cascading from policy, through strategy, procedures and into performance management. Yet embedding in policy, strategy, procedures and performance management are recognised change management tools (Moran and Avergun, 1997). The absence of such embedding is likely to be a major contributing factor in the failure of practice to reflect policy commitments, as implied through the breaches of the Compact Code for Funding and Procurement. Also puzzling is why some practitioners embed in some aspects of policy, strategy, procedures and performance but not in others. No pattern emerges but others may choose to probe the optimum mix, for example, is it sufficient to embed in policy and performance management alone?

The responses set out in Table 2 are also interesting in terms of the levels of working awareness amongst the practitioners, across the Compact Code (89%), Concordat (88%) and the Eight Principles (83%), which were launched in three tranches over ten years. Are those findings representative of a level of typicality since the initiative launch, and if that is the case, does a similar pattern apply in respect of other policy initiatives?

Generalising on Chapman et al's (2008) findings relating to the North East of England, the public sector could increase its third sector supply market size by 33% if it removed perceived barriers to contracting, which appears possible through embedding the core policy commitments into practice, and therefore yielding an economic, as opposed to policy or altruistic, case.

## **Conclusions**

UK public policy has made commitments relevant to English local government procurement practitioners' engagement with the third sector. The purpose of those policy commitments is to improve public service delivery through greater involvement of the third sector, not only as a potential provider, but also in designing, shaping and calling public services to account. Yet, in answer to the core question, this exploratory research suggests that public procurement does not appear as ready as it should be to respond to the third sector commissioning agenda. Insufficient procurement practitioners appear to understand that procurement fits within a commissioning process, have embedded the key policy commitments regarding third sector commissioning into procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management – doing so could help improve service delivery but also procurement's influence in commissioning decisions. While other countries may have an interest in the policy commitments catalogued, they should take note of the issues regarding embedding in local procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management.

## **Implications**

For public procurement managers to make an optimum contribution to third sector commissioning they will need to have a sound grasp of the differences between commissioning and procurement. They will also have to have a good knowledge of existing public policy commitments and embed those commitments within procurement policy, strategy, procedures and performance management. This research has catalogued the initiatives but the research has been exploratory, it would therefore be of benefit to progress the research questions further. In addition, it would be particularly interesting to compare the impact on public service delivery, through a comparative analysis of some councils which have fully embedded the policy

commitments, and a separate group of councils which have not. Researchers may also benefit from considering the effectiveness of eNewsletters in soliciting survey responses. Research would also be of interest in establishing the effectiveness of cascading policy in general to practice.

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	Profile of councils at time of research	Profile of lead practitioner responses	% response rate from lead practitioners
Unitary	47	3	6.38
Metropolitan	36	2	5.56
County	34	4	11.76
London Borough	33	8	24.24
shared service		1	
Response rate	150	18	12.00

**Table 1: Responses from lead practitioners in county and single tier councils.**

	Year	Unaware	Aware but not in detail	Working awareness	Embedded in procurement policy	Embedded in procurement strategy	Embedded in procurement procedures	Embedded in procurement performance management
Compact Code (n=18)	2003	2 11%	0 0%	16 89%	2 11%	6 33%	3 17%	1 6%
Concordat (n=17)	2005	1 6%	1 6%	15 88%	5 29%	6 35%	4 24%	2 12%
8 Principles (n=18)	2006	0 0%	3 17%	15 83%	3 17%	1 6%	2 11%	1 6%

**Table 2: Awareness and embedding of policy commitment**

