



Getting to grips with commissioning

*In a new series exploring opportunities for arts organisations, museums and library services to engage in public service commissioning, **Jessica Harris** explains the importance of understanding the outcomes commissioners are looking for.*

Put simply, strategic commissioning enables commissioners to procure services that will deliver the priority outcomes which are set out in the strategic plans of their organisations. The Local Government Association (LGA) document [Understanding commissioning - A practical guide for the culture and sport sector](#) (p6-7), gives a useful definition and an easy to read diagram giving more details. It notes that commissioning takes place across a wide range of public services. From adult social care and children's services in local authorities, to health services, to services such as offender management and others, all are potential commissioners of services that will help them achieve their goals. But whatever the context, the cycle of activities which commissioning involves is common to all.

The guide is particularly helpful in clarifying the difference between commissioning and procurement. Whereas procurement is one part of the commissioning process – the part that is concerned with acquiring goods, works and services of the right quality, at the right time and at the best price – the commissioning cycle is broader and more encompassing. It involves assessing the needs of the target population or community; setting priorities and developing strategies to deliver these; then procuring services from service providers to meet those needs and targets; and monitoring and evaluating outcomes to ensure that the needs have been met. Effective commissioning also involves consulting with and involving a range of stakeholders, services users, communities and service providers. Some commissioners take their engagement with users, providers and stakeholders even further, spending time on co-production to ensure that services really reflect the needs of users. We will come back to this in future articles.

Some people question whether commissioning is with us for the long term, or is just the latest trend. [A graph](#) shows the direction of travel towards contracts and away from grant aid as a source of funding for the wider voluntary sector – and a significant proportion of this wider sector are arts and cultural organisations.



So, if you're wondering about your organisation's scope to engage in commissioning, then learning from others who have found creative ways to respond to commissioner priorities may be a useful starting point. The first of our case studies, [Reflecting national priorities in healthcare](#), reveals how National Museums Liverpool (NML) has done this by using collections from the city's museums to help improve the skills and empathy of health and social care staff working with people with dementia.

Dementia is a high priority for health and care services nationally, and developing the understanding and skills of the workforce in this field is high on the agenda for the Department of Health (DoH) and others. NML's work with older people and people with dementia came to the attention of DoH because of its alignment with an important aspect of national policy – namely, the ambition of DoH to improve the skills and quality of the workforce in this field.

NML's first commission of £86,000 from DoH resulted from this, enabling it to develop a training and education programme for carers in 2011. Outcomes from this which were valued by DoH included measureable performance improvements among health and social care staff working with people with dementia: a demonstrable shift in their cognitive and emotional understanding of dementia and implications for those affected and their carers; an enhanced capacity to consider and assess their own attitudes and performance, including 'quickness to judge' in care situations; and more responsive, appropriate care relationships rather than over-use of reactive, 'textbook' methods.

A second and third commission from DoH has enabled NML to work with other museum services elsewhere to broaden this approach. The most recent commission will help support NML replicate its approach to digital museum content through the My House of Memories app, with new social care and museum partners in the South of England.

Whether you are working locally or nationally, thinking about how the impact of your work supports the outcomes commissioners are looking for is important. The LGA's [Guide to developing a local outcomes framework for culture and sport](#) will help with this. It provides examples of other outcomes frameworks, such as in the fields of children and young people, health and wellbeing, older people. It also provides a step by step guide to developing your own outcomes framework, including useful templates.

Jessica Harris is Project Manager for the [Cultural Commissioning Programme](#), a three-year Arts Council England funded programme which supports the arts and cultural sector to engage with public service commissioning, and also works with commissioners to raise their awareness and understanding of how the arts and cultural sector can help deliver their outcomes. It is delivered by a partnership of [National Council for Voluntary Organisations](#) (lead partner), [NPC](#) and [nef](#).



Through this series of articles we explore the opportunities and challenges for the arts and cultural sector to engage in public service commissioning, and what this might mean in terms of strengthening engagement with audiences and diversifying income sources. We will highlight case studies of cultural organisations which are engaged in public service commissioning, to share their learning. We will also signpost you to [useful information, resources and support](#), including those in our online library, , linked to topics explored in the case studies.

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