

Commissioning Services for Children, Young People and Families

A Study of the Dynamics in
Six Local Authority Areas

SHM



Research Report No
DCSF-RR133

*Commissioning Services for Children,
Young People and Families*

*A Study of the Dynamics in
Six Local Authority Areas*

SHM

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

© SHM

ISBN 978 1 84775 494 3

July 2009

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background context.....	1
Our diversity criteria and sample.....	1
Our research approach.....	2
Our objective in this report.....	3
The big message.....	3
PART 1: Starting Points for the Support Programme.....	5
PART 2: Different Leadership and Structural Arrangements.....	10
2.1 Leadership Arrangements.....	10
2.2 Structures and governance arrangements.....	12
PART 3: Common Calls for Support.....	19
3.1 The Talent Crisis.....	19
3.2 The Capacity Crunch.....	21
3.3 The Elusive Nature of Outcomes.....	22
PART 4: Implications for the Commissioning Support Programme.....	25
4.1 Initial assessment.....	25
4.2 Bespoke support.....	25
4.3 Generic tools and resources.....	26

INTRODUCTION

Background context

In the run-up to the Commissioning Support Programme, SHM was asked by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) to carry out 'audience insight' research with practitioners of children's commissioning. The aim of this work is to provide the DCSF and the supplier of the support programme with a valuable evidence base about the practitioner audience to inform the design, planning and delivery of the support programme.

We conducted six case study investigations in six different local authority areas. Overall in these case studies, our focus was on understanding more about the *dynamics* that surround commissioning, especially in relation to questions of leadership, partnership and locality working.

The intention is to give the eventual supplier of the support programme nuanced information about different kinds of local authority and Children's Trust arrangements. Direct extrapolation on the basis of six case studies is not advisable, but there are nevertheless common themes which we have found emerging by talking to commissioners at several different levels of Children's Services, to PCT commissioners, and where we can, to Head Teachers, and representatives from the voluntary sector.

The barriers and enablers to good commissioning specific to each of our case studies, together with the common themes that resonate between them, will give the supplier further information on ways to pitch support, and where demand is likely to be consistent.

Our diversity criteria and sample

The selection of our six case study areas was based on a series of agreed diversity dimensions. The sample included two-tier county councils, metropolitan councils, borough councils, and unitary authorities.

Within each selected case study area we worked with a local champion, usually the Director of Children's Services, who helped us to identify a sample of eight or more stakeholders in a range of different roles to interview for the case study. The list of stakeholders we interviewed was therefore different in each case study area. In addition we argued wherever possible that we should interview the **Chief Executives** of the Councils and **local elected members** to explore the importance of senior level buy-in to the success of commissioning, and the barriers presented by unsupportive elected members in many cases. Taken in the round, the consultation we conducted across all six case study areas reached a diverse range of different stakeholders, both within the authority and the local Children's Trust, including:

- Chief Executives in the LA and PCT
- Directors of Children's Services
- Elected members
- Voluntary and Community Sector representatives
- Jointly funded commissioners (LA/PCT, Children's Trusts)
- Head teachers
- A range of key people working in Children's Services in the LA

Our research approach

We used a *deep* approach (many respondents in each of a few 'case study' local authorities) to explore the dynamics of commissioning and the ways in which the perspectives of the key players interact to increase or diminish the effectiveness of commissioning.

Initially we developed and agreed with the DCSF an in-depth interview guide. This reflected the core set of questions we would use to explore the dynamics of commissioning in each local area. The interview guide contained a series of open questions arranged against the following key themes:

- Understanding Commissioning
- Leadership and Culture
- Governance and Structures
- Capacity and Capability
- Relationships and Partnerships
- The Journey - Now and Next

Across our case study areas, the approach we took to this work was flexible and consultative. We enabled the local champion to act as a 'client' to guide us in tailoring the focus of our investigation as well as the sample. This approach allowed us to understand the factors that make a difference in each local area, rather than imposing any pre-existing notion of our own about the factors that would matter most. It also helped us to move from a purely diagnostic approach to a **generative** outcome, which would help the local authority area to move forward. We worked with the DCS (or someone in a closely related role) as a partner, in order to enact the principle that the practitioners should have ownership of support around commissioning.

In each area our first step was the initial engagement of the local champion, with whom we identified the list of local individuals to be engaged in the case study. The second step was to set up and carry out the research interventions with these individuals, in a way that was tailored to the needs of each area. The basic model was to conduct semi-structured telephone interviews with participants. However, we visited each local area at least once, and conducted a number of face-to-face interviews during these visits. Where relevant and practical, we also engaged some respondents through a group interview, bringing together a range of practitioners in related roles to discuss their experiences or challenges working on a particular area of children's commissioning, e.g. schools commissioning. As a final step, we created a feedback report for each local area and went to present our findings to the people we had consulted, using this moment as an opportunity to facilitate some discussion and debate about the implications of our work.

Our objective in this report

Our intention in this report is to help the suppliers of the support programme shape and tailor what they offer, so that they can ensure maximum engagement from their target audience, and thus build the success of the programme. The report outlines the key themes we have identified from a crosscutting analysis of our case study investigations. It is backed up by a series of six full case study reports, which will provide a rich supporting evidence base specific to each of the local areas in which we conducted our investigation.

To make this overarching report as useful and practical as it can be, we have organised our analysis in order to answer three key supplier-oriented questions:

1. How do the starting points for the support programme differ across local areas?
2. How do leadership and structural arrangements differ across local areas?
3. What are the key support needs identified by commissioners?

In each part of this report we unpack the key themes we have identified across our case studies, and then outline the implications for the support programme. We have illustrated our key themes with anonymous stories and verbatim quotes gathered from the six case study areas. These vignettes and quotes are intended to bring our findings to life - they are illustrations of the particular dynamics in one local area but care should be taken when attempting to generalise from them.

The big message

Practitioners accept that commissioning is an important new agenda for children's services. This being the case, it is easy to assume that the key people are bought into it, that it will solve problems, that it can be overlaid onto existing structures, that we have the talent to manage it, and that the goodwill around commissioning will be sustained.

But any programme of support that assumes we live in such a world runs the risk of missing the mark. Although there is widespread support among practitioners for the principles behind commissioning and the focus on outcomes for children and families, the contexts in which commissioners are operating are hugely varied, often constrained, and riddled with challenges. The support programme needs to take on board the patchy, constrained world in which commissioners are operating. Otherwise, the programme would result in a triumph of ideological hope over practical experience.

In order to ensure that practical realities stay at the heart of the support programme there are a few simple but important imperatives the supplier should take on board:

- Any package of support should begin with a process of sympathetic listening. Bespoke support will need to dig into the past in order to work out what will be possible and effective in the present.
- The programme should give Chief Executives and other senior leaders the opportunity to come together to become aligned around a vision for their local area, and help them to articulate how children's commissioning supports the achievement of that vision.

- The programme must recognise the importance of Assistant Directors (ADs) by providing them with bespoke support for their challenging leadership roles with respect to their teams and partners.
- The programme should focus on supporting commissioners and their partners to create a shared sense of ownership over local structural arrangements. The support programme could add real value by facilitating dialogue within Children's Trusts and locality partnerships, to address key concerns about the way relationships are working.
- The programme should enable practitioners to arrive at a much clearer understanding of commissioning competencies, and to recognise what quality looks like within these competencies. Ultimately, after three years, the support programme should aim to have brought about a much higher profile for commissioning careers.
- The support programme should provide new models for calculating commissioning capacity. These tools will help commissioners to exert influence within their organisations over the allocation of budgets and the creation of new posts. Critically, they will help to achieve a larger change in mindsets around the way people perceive commissioning roles and their value to local authorities.
- The programme must provide commissioners with much-needed support around defining and measuring outcomes. Commissioners are asking for tools and guidance to support their particular effort to focus on prevention and early intervention.

PART 1: Starting Points for the Support Programme

Our first reflection based on the experience of conducting these case studies is that practitioners are starting from strikingly different points. This is not just a question of their 'maturity' in terms of understanding commissioning. The way practitioners talk about commissioning, the way they think about the journey, and their viewpoints on the limits of the possible, reveal significant **mindset differences**.

If you look at how much people understand commissioning, you could certainly make some generalisations about where local authorities are starting out. Commissioners in Children and Young People's Services generally feel they are working with a shared definition of commissioning within their own departments. At the strategic level commissioners feel that they have the right frameworks in place, and they have usually been recipients of some kind of training or development activity to help them to understand the theory of outcomes-based commissioning. However, at the same time, people across different authorities and Children's Trusts are finding the **transition from strategy to operation** to be a challenging one. They have generally had some important successes in commissioning services out in certain areas, for instance in Youth Services or in Child and Adult Mental Health Services. But this not the case across the board, and to apply commissioning to other areas is still seen as a mountain to climb, for instance in the area of education.

Again, if you look at organisational cultures within local authorities, you could easily make some generalisations about the cultural challenges that they are facing. The baggage left over from authorities' historical roles as providers is something that all local authorities are wrestling with, to a greater or lesser extent. Staff members within local authorities are used to describing activities, not outcomes. They are used to developing their own action plans because they feel like the experts in how a service should be provided. Unsurprisingly, then, they are uncomfortable with the idea that there should be SLAs for services that they provide in-house. They are all wrestling with the notion that there should be a strict split between provider and commissioner, while in practice many people are still 'wearing two hats' and imagine they will be doing so for some time to come.

"A barrier is the resistance to having SLAs for all services."

"Commissioners should not take overly prescriptive and didactic approaches, and recognise the experience of the providers. They think they know best because they have a provider mindset."

So local authorities do, in many ways, have common starting points. But this then begs the question, why do they feel so different to engage with? Why do some express a sense of boundless optimism about the future, while others feel that the future is out of their control? Why do some commissioners accept the benefit of working jointly without question, while others are still to be persuaded that there is any gain for them in working together? And why do some feel that the pace of change is exhilarating, while others feel completely overwhelmed by it? These questions need to be raised because they will make all the difference when it comes to giving and receiving support. There is a different set of assumptions and expectations operating from place to place, which cannot be ignored because they have the potential to dilute or even destroy the value of the support that is offered through the support programme.

“Here, people are up for the challenge.” “We have always punched above our weight.”

“The agenda is coming down like a train, so it feels unattainable. You do the best you can, but it feels impossible.”

From the early days of our investigation, it was clear that these mindset differences existed between the different case study areas. In particular, we found that people’s **histories** were having an enormous impact on their present realities, whether they wanted this to be the case or not. People talked to us as much about their histories as they did about the present and the future. Sometimes this was by way of explaining why things had worked, and sometimes as an explanation of why things had really not worked that well. The conditions in which commissioning is happening in the present, are in large part being shaped by the histories of organisations, partnerships and local areas, and the collective memory that those histories have shaped in the minds of practitioners and other stakeholders.

In some case study areas, we found that a **recent memory of internal turbulence** had left bruises on the internal dynamics among the staff in the local authority. Dramatic organisational restructures can create a lack of confidence or trust in the senior leadership. In some places, commissioning then becomes a by-word for reducing staff numbers and making people redundant. In these instances, the commissioning agenda is viewed with greater fear and suspicion than it might otherwise have been. Those who feel most vulnerable are typically service managers and their teams, and their perceptions of the agenda can make cultural change all the harder to achieve. The risk is that their wealth of experience and expertise is not tapped in order to help shape the ongoing transformation of the authority, and instead they are perceived as obstructers as a result of not being on board with the direction.

The vignette below tells the story of one authority whose present has been affected by its own recent history of organisational turbulence.

Story 1: History of organisational turbulence

Authority A has a new leadership in place. The new Chief Executive has been clear that she wants ‘the right people on the boat’ as she leads the Council towards becoming a commissioning organisation. In this new leadership environment, the organisation is felt to be starting afresh, and there is a moment of opportunity for the children’s commissioning agenda.

But before the new Chief Executive arrived, the Council experienced a bruising restructure, which left its people feeling at ‘rock bottom’. This restructure had been driven by the need to cut costs and centralise activities, and people felt that services had been put at risk in the process. The new Chief Executive recognised that there was a need to stop this process in its tracks and take stock, placing a renewed emphasis on the importance of services. Against this backdrop there remains a huge leadership challenge to drive the commissioning agenda forward. A significant restructure still needs to happen within 3rd and 4th tier posts, and it is clear that there will be fewer managers because of financial imperative to reduce spend. There is also a pressure to move forward with the agenda rapidly, to ensure that the authority is not left lagging behind other authorities.

In some areas, local authorities face another kind of turbulence in their history, the turbulence that comes along with **being an 'intervention authority'**. In these areas, people remember a time when their Council performed so badly against its targets that it was regarded by central government as being in special measures. As a result, these authorities experience close scrutiny and corrective interventions by central government as a means of addressing the poor performance record of the Council. We found that these histories of intervention are having an impact on the present: they make practitioners feel less in control of the direction of travel, more burdened by the pace of change, and pressured to meet short-term targets which take away from their ability to set aspirational, longer-term visions.

Histories of intervention can also have a damaging impact on the Council's relationships in the local area, when local people lose confidence in the Council. In some cases schools in particular 'go off on their own' because they fail to see how the Council can add value to what they are doing. In some areas, the relationship between the Council and the local schools reached such lows in the past that the schools had ceased all contact with the Council. This is a clear barrier to successful commissioning, especially given the importance of school engagement in locality commissioning arrangements.

"Over the course of a lot of years there has been a real rift in communication with head teachers... a breakdown in relationship between education and CYPS."

"Schools may have felt they lacked strategic direction and so went off to do their own thing"

"In the past support from the centre has not been good. 'Schools do their own thing'. Some head teachers have taken on a role they shouldn't have... building their own empire."

The vignette below tells the story of one authority who is struggling with its past as an intervention authority.

Story 2: History of intervention

In the past, there has been a troubled relationship between Head teachers and the LA in Authority B. This is now well behind them, but has left some scars, and may be impacting on the attempt to build strong locality boards. In situations where schools have in the past gone off on their own, it is hard to build trust with the council again. The only lever available to the DCS is then persuasion. While this is the right kind of lever to be using in a commissioning context, especially in relation to schools, which can act as commissioners in their own right, and commission services from the Council, in situations where there is a history of intervention, the use of persuasion can lack bite. Since Head teachers are vital partners in building strong locality working, overcoming this lack of trust, together with offering Head teachers training in commissioning, is necessary if locality partnerships are to grow.

Whether authorities have experienced intervention or not, the **history of partnership dynamics** in local areas has a real bearing on commissioning in the present. In each of our case study areas, partnership histories are affecting the success of joint working in the present, particularly within Children's Trusts. A critical relationship is that between the Council and the PCT. In some cases, a historically arms-length relationship between the PCT and the Council has resulted in misalignment and low levels of trust. It is even harder to achieve alignment in two-tier authorities where there are multiple PCTs instead of just one. Where the relationship between the Council and the PCT has been distant in the past, the Council may feel that the PCT has deprioritised the children's agenda and been disengaged from the Children's Trust. The PCT, on the other hand, may view the Council as acting too unilaterally in the development of the Children's Trust, and therefore may not feel ownership over the direction the Trust is taking. In these situations, partners do not always see the mutual benefit of aligning or pooling budgets, or investing in joint posts. This makes it more difficult for Children's Trusts to move from strategy to full joint working.

The vignette below tells the story of one authority that is facing difficulties with joint working due to a historically challenging relationship with the PCT.

Story 3: Challenging partnership with the PCT

The historical relationship between Authority C and the local PCT has been very 'arms length'. The Children's agenda was not a strong priority for the PCT. Much of the PCT's attention was focussed on its own restructure from separate PCTs into one organisation. There has been a distant relationship between the Children's Trust board and the PCT Board, and no health presence on the Trust Board until relatively recently.

The pooling or aligning of budgets has not been easy when children's health is not the top priority for the PCT. From a PCT perspective, its investment in joint commissioning posts has not always been beneficial. The PCT is emphatic about the need to have 'clear articulated benefits' with any pooled budgets. The perception is that some of these posts end up behaving like Council employees and are not held to account jointly.

Conversely, in places where there is a long history of partnership working, practitioners assume that it is better to work together than to work alone. In these areas partnership working has come to feel 'natural' rather than something that needs to be carefully engineered. The best examples of long-established partnership histories have led to a high level of trust between the Council and its partners, and a strong alignment of priorities and funding unified around a common vision for the local area. Again, these benefits are particularly apparent where there has been a close historical relationship between the Council and the PCT. In areas where the Chief Executives of these two organisations are fully aligned around a local vision, we observed the success of joint working to be at its greatest. Across all our case study areas, one of the biggest differences we observed between practitioners was the difference between those who say '*why should we work together?*' and those who say '*why shouldn't we work together?*'

While a long history of partnership enables partners to become unified around common goals, we should also point to the important role that can be played by **the history of the local area**. In local areas where there is a history of entrenched inequalities and deprivation, we have found that this unity of vision and purpose between partners is, at least in part, born out of a shared sense of a battle against the local history. In these contexts, for instance, it is more likely that the PCT, the Local Authority and other statutory partners will have shared concerns about child poverty and the wide reaching impact of that poverty on aspirations, education levels and health outcomes.

“Something beneath that, that is longstanding, we know the issues, we know they are huge around deprivation, and all the issues that flow from that, we are in it together. We know that one organisation alone can’t tackle it. The only way through is working together.”

The vignette below tells the story of one authority that has created a compelling vision for change with its partners as a result of its challenging local context.

Story 4: History of the local area

Authority D seeks to serve people in an area of high deprivation. School attainment had been very low, and has had to be brought up to national average. There is a severe job and skills shortfall in the area. Life expectancy is lower than the national average.

As a result, Authority D is very highly motivated to use whatever tools Government offers in order to drive up aspiration, wellbeing and opportunities in the area. Authorities like Authority D are very interested in the pilot schemes set up by Government. On the other hand, if they are high-performing authorities, they tend at the same time to resent excessive target-setting by the Government, and will resist it, saying that outcomes are more important than processes and performance targets. Authority D works in a context of strong local solidarity, which has helped it to create a powerful vision for change. Optimistic and determined in outlook, Authority D sees integrated working as essential to its aims, but equally, will not allow central Government to dictate its operation.

What does this mean for the support programme?

Although authorities and Children’s Trusts face a common set of challenges in many ways, we have seen that their starting points are strikingly different. The key differences are not simply a product of being at different stages on the evolutionary journey towards better commissioning. In fact, the most striking differences are about the way people see the journey, how optimistic they are, and what their expectations are of their partners. All these differences in mindset are as much a product of the past as anything else, whether that means coming to terms with a history of organisational turbulence, intervention, or distant relationships between Children’s Trust partners.

If the support programme is to engage practitioners at all these different starting points, there is a real need for support to begin with a process of sympathetic listening. Bespoke support will need to dig into the past in order to work out what will be possible and effective in the present. Initial assessment with practitioners should gather information about the history of their partnerships, organisations and local areas. By gathering this information the support programme can make sure that bespoke support avoids some of the pitfalls and delivers interventions that will work in the particular local context. If the support programme underestimates the importance of this upfront listening and intelligence gathering, then there is a serious risk that practitioners will feel put upon and overburdened rather than empowered and enabled by what is being offered to them.

PART 2: Different Leadership and Structural Arrangements

While Part 1 of our report offered insights into the motivational starting points we found in different areas, Part 2 will provide an insight into the different ways in which commissioning is structured and configured across these areas. Commissioners are developing their own structures and configurations to support commissioning in accordance with their particular local contexts. Though there are some resemblances, these arrangements do look very different from place to place. They have developed in a way that is dependent on histories, partnership dynamics, personalities, geographies, and local priorities. The key differences we will explore in this section are in relation to leadership arrangements on the one hand, and structures and governance arrangements on the other.

2.1 Leadership Arrangements

Our investigation across local areas has led us to conclude that the challenge of commissioning is largely a challenge about visionary and aligned leadership. There is a palpable difference between local areas where the senior leadership merely *accept* the need for children's commissioning and Children's Trusts, and those areas where the senior leaders actively *embrace* the opportunity to work together on children's commissioning. It goes without saying that the concept of children's commissioning is now broadly accepted as the future for Local Authorities, in the same way that this idea has gained acceptance within the Health sector. However, beneath the skin of this acceptance, the way senior leaders actually work together to tackle this agenda is worlds apart in different places, and this can make all the difference.

We have seen the huge benefit of **integrated working between senior leaders** to enable the success of the commissioning agenda. The best examples are those in which the senior leaders work closely together and are aligned around a shared vision. One critical relationship is that between the Chief Executive of the Council and the Director of Children's Services. Where this relationship is weak, the DCS can feel isolated in their decisions and the Children's Trust can suffer from operating in a 'vacuum' away from the real locus of power. However, in instances where this relationship is strong, the children's agenda is more likely to be closely linked to the wider agenda in the Council, and the Children's Trust is more likely to be closely aligned with the Local Strategic Partnership. This makes it possible to achieve greater efficiencies through joined-up thinking and to give the Children's Trust greater strategic clout locally. Another critical relationship is between the Chief Executive of the Council and the Chief Executive of the PCT. In local areas where this relationship is weak the Children's Trust can lack teeth and become a 'talking shop' without senior-level buy-in. In local areas where these leaders are in close communication, there is more likely to be a strong Children's Trust with a greater ability to make strategic decisions and commission jointly.

"The previous CE said 'ok you're responsible for children and young people - you're the person who's accountable so children are you!'"

"We can make huge gains by working together, it's been a very fractured place before."

The tripartite arrangement of the DCS, the CE of the Council, and the CE of the PCT is a powerful force in children's commissioning. This arrangement works best when it is driven by a clear long-term vision that has been co-developed. The presence of such vision makes a big difference to the progress of commissioning, primarily because it is a vehicle for ownership and buy-in. When a vision is clear, the partnership between the PCT and the Council can become more 'natural' and easier to sustain. It can give the senior leaders courage and a mandate to stand up and challenge the more short-term targets placed on them by central government and

the inspection regimes. It can help to manage the influence of elected members and reduce the potential damage caused by political lobbying, which cannot have such a destabilising effect if the Council's strategy is leading towards a clear vision that the key partners and the community at large buy in to.

The vignette below tells the story of one authority in which the strong leadership between an aligned CE and DCS is making all the difference.

Story 5: Integrated working between the CE and the DCS

Authority E is a small unitary authority. Because of its history, there has been an opportunity, which the Authority has seized, to put in place strong leadership, and to strengthen the links between the CE and the DCS. While the DCS chairs the Children's Trust, strategic support is also reinforced by this hands-on commitment from the CE. There is an emphasis in Authority E on clarity of vision, and communication of that vision. Unusually the vision for the Children's Trust is driven by a vision for the whole area. This ensures that Children's Trust priorities are very high on the agenda for the Council as a whole. However it might also point to accountability issues. Without complete clarity around accountability, the Children's Trust runs the risk of being weakened.

Beyond the critical top level of leadership, we found **a range of other leaders and champions who have a significant impact** on children's commissioning locally. Who these champions are, and the nature of their power and influence, varies from place to place. One important group of people are **those at Assistant Director (AD) level**, often reporting to the Director of Children's Services. This tier of people is critical because they are directly linked to senior leadership as well as an important conduit down to the lower echelons of the organisation, and therefore are a key part of any cultural change. They can either obstruct or enable the commissioning agenda depending on the dynamics between themselves and their DCS. In some cases, these ADs see themselves as the real day-to-day leaders of children's commissioning, and the Children's Trust in their area. Sometimes this can be an empowering position to be in, particularly where they are well supported by the DCS, but sometimes these ADs can feel exploited by the situation and chronically over-worked. In all cases, the hands-on leadership of the DCS makes a real difference to the motivation of ADs and also to the motivation of some staff in tier 3 roles. It is important to remember that these leaders and middle managers are unlikely to come into contact with the CE in many cases, and so it is the DCS's leadership that is the most visible to them.

"This means changing the type of leader you have at the top of the organisation. It means changing the job description of Assistant Directors - people who might come from one particular background, but are able to work across portfolios."

Building on this, it is important to highlight that champions of children's commissioning may come in many guises, they are certainly not limited to a particular role description, nor are they all practitioners. In our case study investigations we found a wide range of champions having an impact, including people from the voluntary sector, elected members, and non-executive Board members. All these champions were passionate about commissioning and determined to play their own part in pushing the agenda forward. They were all taking different approaches to making change happen, for instance by lobbying at the PCT Board, making a constructive case for more inclusive commissioning practices, or setting up mechanisms and channels for dialogue

in their local areas. These local champions are an undeniable part of the dynamics of commissioning locally, and therefore the support programme will need to engage with them and recognise the part they play.

What does this mean for the support programme?

We have seen that successful commissioning environments are built on effective integrated leadership arrangements supported by clear visions for change. The support programme will have the highest impact if it can bring together senior leaders to become aligned around a vision for their local area, and if it can help them to articulate how children's commissioning supports the achievement of that vision. The relevant leaders will vary from place to place but will certainly include the CE of the Council and the PCT as well as the DCS. The support programme will need to be sensitive and flexible enough to understand when individual interventions are needed and when collective interventions are needed, and strike the right balance given the particular context. The support programme will miss a huge opportunity if it does not allow for this. Without the right individual interventions, the risk will be that some leaders do not feel their particular interests have been taken into account. Without the right collective interventions, the key partners will not have sufficient shared ownership over the solutions and there is a risk that the impact will dissipate.

We have seen that Assistant Directors are a key audience for the support programme, as they often see themselves as the real day-to-day leaders of children's commissioning. The programme needs to recognise the importance of the ADs by providing them with bespoke support for their challenging leadership roles with respect to their teams and partners, and by facilitating better dialogue between themselves and the senior leadership. Without doing this, the support programme risks making the ADs feel that their vital role is not being recognised, and exacerbating their feeling of overwhelm.

Finally, the role of other local champions should not be ignored when planning a package of support for a local area. Who these champions are and how they work with the commissioning leaders will vary, but there is a real need to clarify their roles, and to provide support that enables their influence to be channelled in the most effective way to achieve more successful commissioning locally.

2.2 Structures and governance arrangements

In our work across local areas we have found that the features and landmarks of commissioning are rapidly emerging, and these arrangements look quite different in each area. We have also seen that structural and governance arrangements are not fixed; rather, they are continuously evolving and being refined. Some of our Local Authorities have recently been through or are in the process of massive restructuring processes. Structural changes can take up a lot of energy, and in some cases distract attention away from much needed cultural change. We have been reminded again and again over the course of our investigation that structure and governance issues are a secondary challenge to the challenge of cultural change. Local leaders of children's commissioning are keen to point out that structural changes do not equate to cultural changes. Indeed, structures work best when there is a focus on building strong partnerships and commitment as the bedrock on which the structures are built.

“Integrating Children’s Services is better than having separate Education and Social Care Services, because it helps to achieve the Every Child Matters outcomes, which absolutely have to have integration. It’s the mindset shift, the attitudinal shift that is important here, rather than the governance and structures per se.”

The critical structure of the Children’s Trust is a focus for local authorities and their partners, who are working to create the frameworks that will enable them to become a commissioning partnership. Trusts are at different stages of development, and are being built on local partnerships at varying levels of maturity. Some have been in existence since 2003 when the first pilots took place, while some were not formally established until four years later. This in turn means that some Trusts have long-established agreements between the key statutory partners, while others are still in the process of working these agreements out and getting the partners signed up to them. Some are working effectively with joint or aligned budgets, while others have yet to get to a stage where the statutory partners are fully signed up to investing mainstream budgets together.

Despite the differences in maturity, there are also some common challenges facing Trusts across local areas. The biggest challenge is to get Children’s Trusts to move beyond setting strategy, to the point where the Trust is fully operational as a body that carries out joint commissioning effectively. In many cases the key partners are not confident in the mutual benefit of investing together and working together. For instance, some Trusts are perceived as bodies that are driven by the Local Authority in a way that is too unilateral. In almost all cases, a lack of clarity about the purpose and responsibilities of the Children’s Trust has made it harder to move forward as a partnership.

“In five years of strategic partnership working, Essex has never managed to turn it into anything operational - nothing is jointly commissioned - despite a joint agreed framework.”

Building on this, there are also challenges around the level and breadth of representation on the Boards of Children’s Trusts. We found examples where Boards do not have consistent senior level representation, and are perceived by stakeholders as ‘talking shops’ without the right ability to make decisions. We learnt that there are live debates about whether the Boards should have representation from providers, and if so, how this should work. In many cases problems have come about as a result of unwieldy governance and approval mechanisms slowing things down. Trusts have been hindered by the legal problems associated with working out accountability and liability issues in relation to the partnership.

“Is it a commissioning Children’s Trust or a providing Children’s Trust or both?”

“A number of people in the Trust don’t see themselves as commissioners.”

“It has felt like a talking shop. Not enough focus on the value that it adds, in partnership terms or in terms of practical outcomes from children.”

In each local area, commissioning leaders are in the process of shaping their own local solutions to these challenges. They generally appreciate that central government has not prescribed the details of how Children’s Trust structures should function, with this flexibility being seen as a benefit in most cases. Children’s Commissioners are themselves deciding whether Trusts should operate with aligned budgets or pooled budgets: in some cases alignment is seen as the first step, and in others it is viewed as a worthwhile end without the need for full budget pooling.

Commissioners are also developing their own ways to streamline the governance of their Trusts, by creating systems that facilitate strategic decision-making. This may be by creating new, smaller steering groups or executive groups to focus on strategic decisions, or by reconfiguring the Board itself.

“The DCSF guidance leaves it open. We don’t want more definition.”

In some areas we worked in ‘work stream groups’ or ‘outcomes groups’ have been developed to feed into the Trust Board. These groups allow Trusts to focus down effectively on particular priority areas, whether these are the Every Child Matters Outcomes or they are specific strands of work requiring a special strategic focus locally, such as 14-19 or Teenage Pregnancy. These groups have enabled some Trusts to demonstrate a real impact over a relatively short period of time, by aligning the relevant partners around a well-defined set of local goals.

*“Our exclusions have got right down... huge, huge impact without spending any money.”
“We got 7% increase in A to Cs; this has been accelerated in last 2 years by work stream groups for 14-19.”*

The vignette below tells the story of one authority in which the establishment of ‘strategy work stream groups’ has had a big impact on some urgent local priorities.

Story 6: Work stream groups

In Authority F, sitting beneath the Executive Board, and feeding into it, three ‘strategy work stream groups’ have been created to focus on addressing particular strategic priorities for children. In addition to their accountability to the Board, these work stream groups have also played a key role in the implementation of the actions resulting from the Joint Area Review (JAR) in early 2006, which ‘basically put the authority in special measures’. The three work stream groups are: Prevention and Early Intervention; 14-19; and Attainment. These groups were each set up with external chairs, from Barnado’s, Connexions and the DCSF respectively. Their membership includes statutory, private and voluntary partners. The role of the external chairs has been seen as crucial in terms of raising confidence and trust among external partners who had previously lost confidence in the Council.

The impact of the three work stream groups has been evident in the time since their establishment. The Prevention and Early Intervention work stream group was tasked with the actions from the JAR and completed those actions well within the year. The 14-19 work stream group is seen to have accelerated the progress in educational achievement, helping the city to achieve a 7% increase in A to Cs in the last 2 years. The Strategic Director of Children, Young people and Skills has also harnessed these work stream groups effectively to address particular priorities through time limited pieces of work. For instance, when the three groups came together to work on school exclusions through the ‘Exclusions Task and Finish Group’ the level of exclusions halved within 6 months. Following this success, the chairs of the three work stream groups meet on a regular basis to maintain links. There has now been an agreement to establish a fourth work stream group on teenage pregnancy.

Another important set of structures is emerging in all of our case study areas – those structures that are designed to support and facilitate **commissioning at locality level**. Indeed, in all cases a concerted shift is being made towards locality working, with arrangements evolving all the time. The guiding principle is that some services need to be commissioned at a locality level, rather than at a council-wide level. Typically, though not in all cases, these services will be universal services, while specialist services will still be commissioned centrally. There is recognised to be a deep well of knowledge and expertise among professionals and institutions at the locality level, which needs to be harnessed in order to achieve better outcomes for the community. Local areas are in the process of setting up partnerships, panels and networks at the locality level to bring together the key professionals to make strategic decisions together for the benefit of the community. The structural arrangements look different from place to place. They include Extended Schools Partnerships, multi-agency panels, locality partnerships, and clusters. Some are focusing on gathering better data and intelligence about vulnerable groups, with a clear focus on prevention and early intervention. Others are working with budgets devolved from the local authority and are beginning to commission some services together.

In relation to locality arrangements, there are some common sets of challenges being experienced across our case study areas. The key challenge is around achieving the buy-in and engagement of the relevant partners and professionals at locality level. This involves bringing about a sea change in mindset and culture within a workforce that is used to working within the boundaries of its particular professions and institutions. Schools are a critical part of the puzzle here. In some areas the relationship between the schools and the Council has historically been very distant, and therefore the Council has had a huge mountain to climb to get them engaged. This is even harder when it comes to academies and foundation schools, which receive do not receive their funding directly from the Council and are less transparent about their budgets. Councils are finding that *persuasion* is the best lever they have to achieve the buy-in they need from locality partners, and this requires a sustained effort and significant resource. Another important challenge facing local authorities is around how to ensure consistency across locality arrangements. There are disparities between localities, both in terms of their different pre-existing arrangements, and in terms of the principles and practices that they are adopting. The way locality structures are governed and led is also inconsistent, and Councils are wondering how best these structures would be managed and governed going forward.

These challenges are perhaps more urgent for large two-tier authorities, where localities need to develop joint commissioning because the size of the authority means that less commissioning activity needs to take place at a whole-council level. These two-tier authorities are wrestling to resolve tensions between the centre and the localities, and they will have to work harder to achieve consistency and good communication going forward.

“The biggest challenge is getting consistency of approach across different clusters... At the moment one cluster is approving one thing and the other is not approving it.”

“Some move faster than others.”

The vignette below tells the story of a two-tier authority that is developing locality working and experiencing tensions between the centre and the localities.

Story 7: Locality arrangements in a two-tier authority

In Authority G, the CE chairs the Children's Trust, which also has an Executive arm. Authority G is two-tier and Localities are seen as sites of action and development on joint commissioning, partly because at the moment, it is difficult for the central Trust body to become fully operational, and partly because of the sheer size of the county.

In the future there may be more tension between the centre and the localities: for example in general it is assumed that localities will commission universal services, while specialist services would be commissioned county-wide, but there are already instances of some localities wishing to commission some specialist services for their area. There are good feedback loops in place between localities and the centre, but it might be worth creating further links, perhaps through the use of more individual commissioning champions who cross between the centre and localities.

In two of our case study areas, another key structure we identified through our investigation is that of **the Joint Commissioning Unit, or JCU**. These units are not common to all local areas, but where they have been established they are seen as a key driving force for children's commissioning. In one area we identified a JCU working effectively across Children's and Adults' Commissioning, and in the other the JCU was focussed on Children and Young People's Commissioning only. These JCUs are typically built around a number of posts funded by the Local Authority and the PCT (and sometimes other partners) and have dual reporting lines into the leadership of both organisations. These teams tend to be made up of staff with a genuine joint perspective and a real commitment to integrated working. Our experience conducting these case studies has highlighted the benefits of these kinds of teams, which are seen to increase levels of trust and commitment across key partners involved with Children's Commissioning. The ongoing challenge facing these JCUs is to resolve the tensions between two different organisations in terms of their languages, cultures, Human Resource frameworks, and central government targets.

"The way the Joint Commissioning Unit has been set up has had quite an impact really. Most of the people around the table were all involved in the services that were commissioned within the community... they understood the importance and value of commissioning."

"It works really well. We describe our roles as 'job share' because we co-supervise the teams. We liaise with each other; make decisions together, always trying to sing from the same hymn sheet."

The vignette below tells the story of one authority in which the JCU is at the heart of the ongoing strength of networking on joint issues to do with children and adults.

Story 8: Joint Commissioning Unit

Since its inception the Children's Trust in Authority H has been based largely around the Joint Commissioning Unit across the LA and the PCT. The Joint Commissioning Unit brings together Adults' and Children's Commissioning. It is jointly funded with the PCT, and managed jointly by the Director of Commissioning and Service Improvement and similar posts in the LA with a 'partner' in the LA. This critical structure is seen to be at the heart of the ongoing strength of networking on joint issues to do with children and adults. The Director of Commissioning of the PCT is a member of the Children's Trust.

Currently the Joint Commissioning Unit is undergoing some remodelling. There is a new Head of Commissioning, Planning and Performance coming in to co-manage the Children's Commissioning Team in the Council to make a similar post in Adult and Community Services. They are looking at the idea of creating joint posts that span children and adults, exploring possibilities such as mental health and substance misuse. (They already have an alcohol post that is set up like this.) But this remodelling exercise is not only about restructuring, it is also about supporting a greater transition of principles and practice and networking across the traditional silos.

In some of our case study areas we found that the **internal structures of the Council are in a state of flux**. In these areas there are significant restructuring programmes underway, with the aim of reducing costs and increasing effectiveness. The future of commissioning is certainly a key part of the direction of travel, but the details of how commissioning will work within the new structures are not always clear and are in the process of being worked out. A key part of the definition that is taking place is around defining where different parts of the organisation's commissioning capacity should sit, and how the different elements should relate to one another.

The vignette below tells the story of one authority that is undergoing a restructuring programme and trying to resolve questions about commissioning capacity.

Story 9: Internal structural change

Authority H is undergoing a huge business transformation programme which will result in a restructured organisation within a new set of design principles. The transformation programme is in the process of resolving precisely how commissioning will fit in with the direction of travel. Although the details are yet to be determined what is clear is that 'strategic commissioning' will be one of the key design principles at the heart of the newly structured organisation. The vision emerging is one in which there is a 'one Council' commissioning framework and process, bringing together all commissioning in a joined-up strategic commissioning function. There are still some important questions to be defined and resolved in achieving this shift. One key question is how much of the strategic commissioning capacity should stay within the directorates and how much should be joined up at the centre. Another question is how to ensure that the central strategic commissioners have the right level of knowledge and understanding about children's services while recognising that they need not be 'experts' in service delivery.

Internal structural changes can create challenges for commissioning in the form of uncertainty within the workforce about the future, anxiety about redundancies, or a kind of paralysis in terms of longer-term planning. In some instances the pace of change is creating a sense of overwhelm within the workforce, and this impacts on commissioning because people feel they are making decisions in response to short-term pressures rather than long-term aspirations. The way changes are managed is critical to ensure stability and confidence remains intact at a time of flux. There is an important, and difficult, balance to be struck by senior leaders who are responsible for bringing about these changes. On the one hand, they feel that they need to bring about change, and often to reduce costs, quickly, but on the other hand they need to ensure that their workforce is not completely disempowered and disengaged by the experience.

What does this mean for the support programme?

We have seen that structural arrangements are different from place to place, and constantly evolving, so the support programme will need to be flexible enough to understand and engage with a variety of different structures, within councils, Children's Trusts and localities. Crucially, though, we have learnt that structures can only be as effective as the partnerships and relationships they are built around. Whether the structure is a Joint Commissioning Unit, a Trust Board, or a locality cluster, it will only be successful if there is a shared sense of ownership and commitment between the partners involved.

The message from children's commissioners is clear: they want to define the structures and governance that will work for them, and they do not want more prescriptive guidance on these structures. The best way for the support programme to add value is not by developing guidance about governance and structures. Instead, the programme should focus on supporting commissioners and their key partners to create a shared sense of ownership over the structural arrangements. For instance, the support programme could add real value by facilitating dialogue within Children's Trusts and locality partnerships, to address some key concerns including: common priorities and mutual benefits, accountabilities, roles and responsibilities, ways of working. It could also offer a menu of pre-existing organisational models that might help individual areas refine or build their own.

PART 3: Common Calls for Support

Across all of our case study areas we have learnt that the biggest challenge and the biggest opportunity is in the area of cultural change. This is what commissioners need the support programme to help them bring about – in their own organisations, in their local partnerships, and right the way down to the frontline local workforce. The philosophy of commissioning is well understood at the leadership level, but the day-to-day implementation of this philosophy will only be possible if the cultural conditions are created for it to take root as a way of working. Ultimately, this means that a shift needs to take place so the key players are all aligned around outcomes for children and families, rather than focussing on their individual organisational or departmental concerns. Within the local authority, the ‘provider mindset’ will need to be overcome, so that staff members are able to articulate outcomes rather than activities. Within the Children’s Trust, partners need to have an embedded sense of a collective purpose and vision. At locality level, groups of professionals need to learn to transcend their old professional boundaries and start thinking and working in an integrated way.

Commissioners are calling for support to help them achieve this cultural shift in their areas. And from their perspective, the support programme can do this best if it focuses on three linked support needs: Talent, Capacity and Outcomes.

3.1 The Talent Crisis

There is a talent crisis facing children’s commissioners around the country. It doesn’t matter how ‘mature’ local commissioning is; this challenge is the same from place to place. Across our case study areas people have told us they are facing huge difficulties in attracting, growing and maintaining the right talent to take up commissioning roles.

The first part of this crisis is around **the market for recruits**. Across the board, commissioners find it hard to identify candidates with the right skill set to fill their lead commissioning roles. They have found that commissioning roles require a unique skill set that is extremely hard to find in one candidate. A common reflection is that “people aren’t born commissioners” and there are not many career paths that produce ‘ready-made’ commissioners. The critical balance that needs to be achieved is between functional expertise, and a set of strategic skills and ways of working. In fact, some argue that the latter is even more important, pointing out that the worst commissioners are the ones who see themselves as the ‘experts’. There is perhaps greater difficulty when it comes to recruiting for joint posts, because these joint appointments require joint skill sets, and they need to satisfy the criteria of both the PCT and the Council.

“For some posts we’ve found it difficult to find applicants. Then we found people who weren’t the finished product. We’ve had to grow them in the post.”

The second part of the crisis is around **the attractiveness of commissioning as a career**. There is a feeling that commissioning roles, especially those within local authorities, are not yet attractive enough positions to attract and maintain the right calibre of candidate. This is largely a salary issue, because the traditional grading systems of local authorities are based on an increasingly irrelevant set of measures about how much resource (human and financial) is being directly managed by the individual in question. This is inappropriate for many commissioning roles, which are set up to be strategic and ‘enabling’ but do not necessarily involve managing large teams or distributing large budgets. Because of this situation, commissioners in local authorities have to find their own tactical approaches to enable them to fill particular roles. This may mean negotiating with Human Resources in order to get vacant posts increased to a higher

pay grading in order to fill the post to a satisfactory level. It may mean recruiting a candidate with an incomplete skill set and attempting to 'grow them in the role'.

"We have recently had to re-advertise the Joint commissioning manager post at a higher grade after 4 failed attempts."

The third part of this crisis is around **the risk that the present 'good will' around commissioning will not be sustainable**. At the present time, children's commissioning is seen as new and exciting area for some people who are particularly passionate about better outcomes for children. These individuals will sometimes accept pay cuts in order to take up cutting edge new commissioning roles, in which they can see the opportunity to have a real impact. Likewise, at locality level there are some exceptionally passionate professionals who have seized the opportunity to be trailblazers for new ways of working, taking up opportunities to participate in programmes such as the Budget-holding Lead Professional Pilots with alacrity. However, one of the messages we are hearing across local areas is that this level of 'goodwill' around commissioning jobs may not be sustainable in the longer-term. In order for commissioning to be successful in a sustainable way, therefore, there is an urgent need to create a much clearer career proposition. People have told us that commissioning needs to be seen as an attractive career for high calibre individuals. It also needs to have career benefits for the wide range of local professionals who engage with locality commissioning arrangements.

The final part of this crisis is around **the lack of a relevant competency framework and accredited training modules available to 'plug the skills gaps'**. Although there is a wide range of training packages targeting the health sector, people in local authorities do not feel that they have a similar set of suitable training options. There is some concern that 'cowboy' training agencies may begin to exploit this gap in the market, without any clear quality guidelines and assurances for the consumer. The big question for commissioners is, what does good quality look like in commissioning? There are a lack of established competency frameworks for children's commissioning, and certainly nothing to match Word Class Commissioning in the health setting. There is a need for more common definition of the competencies needed for success, both in terms of functional competencies and personal competencies. Some of the most urgent priorities are in the areas of needs analysis, performance measurement, developing the market, and managing contracts.

"With performance staff and commissioning staff there's no off the shelf training and it's hard to fill the gaps."

"We need a small number of specialist commissioners. And we need a management development programme to teach those who contribute to the commissioning cycle, so that ADs can impart commissioning skills to lead commissioners."

What does this mean for the support programme?

Commissioners across the country are calling for support to attract and develop talent into key posts. The current pipelines and levers available to them are inadequate and this has resulted in nothing less than a crisis for practitioners across very different local areas. The support programme has a huge opportunity to make a difference by unblocking this crisis. First, the support programme can help practitioners by enabling them to arrive at a much clearer understanding of commissioning competencies, and to recognise what quality looks like within these competencies. Practitioners are calling for the support programme to provide accredited training modules to meet a clearly defined standard which commissioners can feel confident in.

And ultimately, after three years, the support programme can hope to have brought about a much higher profile for commissioning careers, and have made these careers much more attractive to high calibre candidates. If the support programme does not address these talent imperatives, the risk is that the current goodwill around commissioning will die away, and the support will not lead to a sustainable approach to talent management. If this happens, practitioners may well find themselves needing another support programme in the not too distant future.

3.2 The Capacity Crunch

Over the course of this study we have found that there is confusion and uncertainty about what capacity is needed to deliver successful children's commissioning. Within particular local authorities, commissioners are struggling to define the right capacity using a perspective that is purely internal. They have no external perspective, no benchmarks to draw on, to assist them with this process, and they see this as a significant gap in their knowledge.

"What do you benchmark on? It's terribly difficult to estimate."

A large part of the problem is not having clarity about the capacity that is needed to do commissioning well. In the old world, local authorities made calculations about capacity based on a service delivery model. In the new world, this model is no longer relevant because commissioners are playing an *enabling* role rather than delivering the services. People in local authorities understand that there needs to be a greater distinction between commissioner and provider roles, but in practice many people still 'wear both hats' and this situation is seen as unlikely to change in the near term. We have found that there are increasing pressures on strategic and operational commissioners with a sense of 'mission creep' as they accumulate more and more work streams. In many cases commissioners may be experiencing a sense of overwhelm and exhaustion, with too much being asked of them, leaving them with an ability to carry out their multiple roles to the ideal level of quality.

"My concern is that we are going to stop being providers and start being enablers to the providers.. the problem is I've got no one to help me.. There is nowhere near enough capacity to manage the contracts."

"There is always a huge amount of work behind the scenes. Working out who to talk to. Having to keep back information. The challenge is the amount of work, sometimes to no effect. I'll pursue a line of development, but it doesn't end up happening."

With this in mind, there is a real need for a new model for calculating capacity for commissioning. People we spoke to highlighted the critical importance of partnership and stakeholder engagement for the success of commissioning roles. If commissioners do not have enough capacity to build relationships with partners and providers, there is a danger that the market development will not be effective, the competitive tendering process will not be inclusive, and the performance monitoring will not be rigorous enough to be conclusive. With this in mind, there is an urgent need to recognise the role of partnership and stakeholder engagement in achieving quality commissioning - these things need to be seen as 'core business' for commissioners, rather than being what you do 'only if there's time.'

There are a number of factors that make the internal process of defining capacity yet more difficult for commissioners. Firstly, the wider council budgets may not be transparent to them, which makes it difficult to influence the reallocation of budgets. Commissioners may have to make arguments to senior leaders with their local authorities who do not share their understanding of what it takes to do commissioning well, and often within the constraints of an overall pressure to reduce costs. Secondly, they are operating within a wider culture that may be coloured with anxiety about change or even union resistance to change. Without an external perspective or a clear evidence base, these commissioners often feel ill-equipped to be clear about, and drive for, the capacity that they think they will need.

“Aspirationally we are there, but it’s about having the bodies. The organisation needs to recognize that commissioning takes time and resources.”

What does this mean for the support programme?

Currently many commissioners within local authorities do not feel equipped to make sound calculations about the capacity they need within their teams. The old models for calculating capacity are no longer appropriate. The support programme can add real value to commissioners by profiling new models for calculating capacity. It can meet an urgent need by providing external benchmarking data about the capacity that is required to commission successfully. These tools will help commissioners to exert influence within their organisations over the allocation of budgets and the creation of new posts. Critically, they will help to achieve a larger change in mindsets around the way people perceive commissioning roles and their value to local authorities. If the support programme does not acknowledge and respond to the capacity crunch, the real danger is that practitioners will not have the time, energy or motivation to engage with the support offered, now or in the future.

3.3 The Elusive Nature of Outcomes

At the heart of children’s commissioning is the desire to improve outcomes for children in our communities. Across local areas, there is a general consensus that commissioning can help to improve outcomes. There is also a genuine commitment to the notion of taking an outcomes-based approach. In local authorities, PCTs and other key partners, the philosophical battle in favour of outcomes is won. The battle that now remains the *practical* battle about how to make outcomes-based accountability a reality. Commissioners around the country are grappling with the operational realities of implementing an outcomes-based approach, and they are in dire need of support.

The first question that commissioners are wrestling with is fundamental: **What is an outcome?** There is a growing recognition that positive outcomes for children take a variety of forms, and some of them are more ‘slippery’ and difficult to define than others. The easiest outcomes to define are the quantifiable ones, such as teenage pregnancy rates and attainment rates, for example. But many people warn that these outcomes are getting too much attention, while in fact they are not the outcomes that we should be worrying about the most. Instead, they tell us, we need to become more focussed on outcomes that are harder to quantify, such as aspiration and improved life chances. We also need to look at outcomes for the whole family around a child, rather than focussing ruthlessly on the individual. Only by taking this approach, will it be possible to move further towards a prevention and early intervention way of working. In the long run the prize will be a more sustainable impact on the well-being and prosperity of communities, and an increasing liberation of the public resources that are ploughed into emergency and acute services, policing, etc.

“A lot of the outcomes are hard to pin down... it’s easier to set outcomes around offending for instance but not struggling at school, it’s about life chances.”

The second question facing commissioners is, **how do you measure outcomes?** The success of children’s commissioning is dependent on commissioners’ ability to allocate budgets against outcomes and demonstrate the impact that this is having. The traditional ways of evaluating the impact of services will not be sufficient for this purpose. The measurement challenge is evolving to demand more sophisticated approaches, such as tracking the progress of children in a longitudinal way over the course of their entire childhood. To do it well, local authorities will need to get better at defining what outcomes they expect to see over a much longer period of time, and they will need to establish systems that enable them to monitor performance across these timeframes. They will also need to be able to make the connections between particular interventions and these longer term outcomes.

“How do you demonstrate that you’re really making a difference? The difference you’re trying to make is some years away.”

“We are getting better results sending children to theatres to improve literacy and this has had an impact on teenage pregnancy. But at the moment, if you say ‘Commission Shakespeare to bring down teen pregnancy!’ people say ‘how is that welfare?’”

Many commissioners and senior leaders are frustrated about the barriers put in their paths by national measurement systems. From their perspective, central government is making it harder for them to focus on the outcomes that will make the most difference in the long run. They identify tensions between national measurement systems and long-term thinking about outcomes. They feel that the inspection methodologies are often too focussed on old world indicators such as process targets and service targets. In some local authorities where the performance record is good, the leadership feels confident enough to challenge the short-termism of the inspection regime. These leaders are willing to sacrifice some of the short-term measures in service of longer-term goals for prevention. However, for other local authorities that have not performed highly, there is a pervasive focus on short-term measures and a pressure to demonstrate ‘quick wins.’ Commissioners in these areas acknowledge the problems this can cause and are calling on central government to alleviate this pressure by taking a broader perspective on outcomes.

“We’re all signed up to the idea that we need to influence early on. There are tensions between performance targets and longer term thinking like that... We have some long-term aims here and we will sacrifice short-term measures. Put that to the inspectors and they say ‘you should be able to do both’. But you have to make a choice.”

“It’s important to raise this at DCSF level: services have been measured publicly, e.g. attendance, using performance indicators that are service-driven. We should be driven in an outcomes way in our planning, on how to make sure that outcomes are a whole system thing, not individually service-driven.”

What does this mean for the support programme?

The support programme will add real value to commissioners if it can provide them with much-needed support around defining and measuring outcomes. An evidence base is needed to support the definition and measurement of 'softer' longer-term outcomes for children and their families. Commissioners are asking for tools and guidance to support their particular effort to focus on prevention and early intervention. If the support programme can provide them with these tools then they will be much better equipped to have a deep, sustainable impact within their communities. But if the support programme does not address the profound questions which practitioners are raising about outcomes, it will be viewed with cynicism as an example of government 'meddling' which is disconnected with the real problems facing children and families.

PART 4: Implications for the Commissioning Support Programme

We have seen that practitioners are starting from different points and working in different local contexts. With an improved understanding of local dynamics and local commissioning contexts, the suppliers of the support programme will be better equipped to maximise the engagement of a wide range of practitioners.

We believe the findings from our case studies can help the suppliers of the programme to improve the success of three kind of support intervention in particular:

- Initial assessment
- Bespoke support
- Generic tools and resources

4.1 Initial assessment

To develop an effective package of support for a local area, the support programme will first need to understand historical factors and current arrangements in that area. Through the self-analysis and planning tool, initial assessment with practitioners should focus on developing:

- Intelligence about the history of their partnerships, organisations and local areas. By gathering this information the facilitator can identify any pitfalls and opportunities associated with the local dynamics. This intelligence gathering should form part of the account management approach. This is a critical first step for the supplier to take, as it will enable the facilitator to strike the right balance between providing positive challenge and being sensitive to local conditions.
- A simple map of the critical structures, partners, leaders and champions within that specific local authority area.

4.2 Bespoke support

The support programme will maximise its impact if it can facilitate dialogue between a range of commissioning leaders and partners. This is the biggest opportunity the support programme has to move a local area from being average to being excellent. In each local area the priorities for this facilitative support will look different, but should incorporate some of the following elements:

- Using bespoke support to develop a shared vision in a local area: The programme should bring together the senior leaders from the Local Authority, the PCT and other statutory partners to become aligned around a vision for their local area, and enabling them to articulate how children's commissioning is central to the achievement of that vision.
- Supporting Assistant Directors to address their personal leadership challenges, and facilitating dialogue between them and their senior leaders to share lessons, opportunities and challenges.

- Working with the Local Authority and its Children's Trust partners to improve the alignment and effectiveness of the partnership. The focus of the intervention will depend on the status of the Trust but is likely to include: developing and challenging an area's conception of who the right partners are; clarifying purpose and articulating benefits for all partners; addressing issues around accountabilities and responsibilities; working on shared definitions and visions.

4.3 Generic tools and resources

The support programme has an opportunity to provide commissioners with a range of generic tools and resources to help them meet their common challenges, including:

- A better understanding of commissioning competencies, and what quality looks like within these competencies. (It is important to work with the existing competency frameworks in World-class commissioning, rather than inventing a new wheel)
- Accredited training modules in which commissioners can feel confident. Some of the most urgent priorities are in the areas of needs analysis, performance measurement, contract management and market development.
- External benchmarking data and tools to help calculate the capacity that is required to commission successfully and make the case for what you need to be effective.
- Practical tools and evidence for defining and measuring outcomes, with a particular focus on 'softer' and longer-term outcomes.

Overall, the Commissioning Support Programme is arriving at a good time for its audience. Practitioners have already made some impressive changes in their local areas, with improving levels of understanding, the development of Children's Trust arrangements and the move towards locality working. Now they recognise the priority is to move from strategy to operation, and to change the culture of the organisations and partnerships they work within. They are calling for support with the next stage of their journey, to resolve the talent crisis, get clearer about capacity, and measure the right outcomes.

Ref: DCSF-RR133

ISBN: 978 1 84775 494 3

© SHM

www.dcsf.gov.uk/research

Published by the Department for
Children, Schools and Families