

**The Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV)
The University of Birmingham
and
Children's Services Network,
Local Government Information Unit (LGIU)**

**RESEARCH REPORT TO
THE NATIONAL YOUTH AGENCY**

**COMMISSIONING
POSITIVE ACTIVITIES
FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE**

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The National Youth Agency
Getting it right for young people

Executive Summary

The National Youth Agency (The NYA) commissioned Inlogov at the University of Birmingham and the Children's Services Network (CSN) at the Local Government Information Unit to research current policy and practice concerned with commissioning positive activities for young people in local authorities across England. The research took place across three government regions (North East, North West, and the West Midlands) between January and April 2008 and involved 17 local authorities in total.

The questions addressed were:

- a) What is the nature of competition and contestability – is there a 'market' in services for young people?
- b) What is the voluntary sector's experience of commissioning? Are authorities using the 'intelligent commissioning' model?
- c) What quality and standards frameworks are taken into account?
- d) To what extent are young people involved in the commissioning process?

This report details the findings under each of these headings.

Competition, contestability and the market

- ◆ The research demonstrates that there is considerable variation amongst local authority areas in the definition, nature and range of the market for services for young people.
- ◆ Most authorities surveyed described the market as being made up of statutory, voluntary and community based organisations with a few identifying active engagement with the private sector.
- ◆ Case study authorities which had developed a commissioning approach generally felt that it had raised standards and brought new providers from both third sector and private organisations into the market.
- ◆ There was a sharp contrast between authorities which commission the great majority of positive activities, and those which were seeking to develop collaborative partnerships and multi-

disciplinary integrated youth work teams. Some of the latter group stated that they did not intend to create a competitive market with tendered contracts for youth services.

- ◆ In authorities that have had a number of years' experience of using competitive tendering as one means of procuring positive activities, there was evidence that voluntary, community and private sector organisations had developed their capacity to respond to the challenges of commissioning in a competitive market

The voluntary sector and 'intelligent commissioning'

- ◆ As above, the overall theme is one of variation dependent on local context, market development, history and policy priorities.
- ◆ A key distinction can be drawn between authorities which seek to ensure third sector representation on all governance structures and those which operate consultative and collaborative arrangements in which the third sector's voice is reported but not present in commissioning decision making processes.
- ◆ Many authorities provide training, advice, secondment, buddying, critical friend and other learning opportunities to enable the third sector to build capacity.
- ◆ Most authorities said they were using an 'intelligent commissioning model' in aiming to understand service needs, understand the market and develop a choice of procurement methods involving:
 - ▷ in-house provision
 - ▷ partnership working through pooled budgets, integrated services and co-location
 - ▷ grants
 - ▷ service level agreements
 - ▷ community development approaches and
 - ▷ competitively tendered services from third sector and private organisations.
- ◆ Several authorities emphasised the importance of developing and maintaining long-term relationships with voluntary and community organisations.
- ◆ Some voluntary and community organisations however felt that they needed more time to develop their expertise and capacity to respond fully to commissioning.

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This particularly related to smaller community-based voluntary organisations.

- ◇ Full cost recovery is a continual issue with the rhetoric not being matched by the experiences of third sector providers.

Quality and standards frameworks

- ◇ Authorities made reference to national standards frameworks, service specific standards, council equalities, health and safety and commissioning and procurement standards, and standards developed locally with providers, young people and other stakeholders.
- ◇ Most authorities appear to have developed their own processes locally. Typical of these was one authority which said they used a range of quality assurance processes including practice visits, detailed monitoring of management information and individual appraisals. Others mentioned the council's scrutiny panels and user-focused customer satisfaction processes.
- ◇ Authorities that use competitive tendering processes rely on contract monitoring to assure value for money.
- ◇ Where utilised, standards frameworks such as the Resourcing Excellent Youth Services targets were seen by the majority of third sector providers as positive in ensuring accountability.
- ◇ There was considerable evidence of methods to monitor and evaluate the views of young people regarding the provision of positive activities. These included mystery shopping, youth inspections, periodic reviews, self-assessments and larger scale satisfaction surveys.
- ◇ There was some, but limited, evidence of outcome focused evaluation either based on the five broad Every Child Matters outcomes or locally defined outcome indicators. Many of the indicators that were identified in this research concern outputs (e.g. number of young people using services), processes (e.g. consultation with young people) or inputs (e.g. cost of service per young person contact).

Young people's involvement in commissioning

- ◇ The research has identified ways in which young people are involved in three distinct

dimensions of the commissioning process:

- ◇ In planning and making decisions about commissioning and service procurement
- ◇ In stimulating the demand side of the market by being enabled to make informed choices to access services
- ◇ In monitoring and evaluating the quality and outcomes of service provision.
- ◇ Whilst authorities cited a variety of imaginative ways in which young people can influence commissioning decisions, they also recognised that they had more to do before they can say that they are involving young people sufficiently in designing their commissioning processes.
- ◇ Most authorities had built on their experiences of involving young people in commissioning decision making for Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund projects by creating mechanisms for young people to be either consulted or directly participate in broader commissioning of positive activities.
- ◇ Young people gave examples of effective participation as well as instances where they felt that they had been consulted. Some young people drew attention to limitations in their decision making roles, from not being involved in setting up the commissioning model to questioning whether senior staff and councillors took their views seriously in practice. However the young people interviewed for this research appeared committed and determined to make representation through consultative and participative processes work for the benefit of young people.
- ◇ Authorities demonstrate an awareness of the importance of involving young people from differing backgrounds including white and black young people, young women and men and disabled and able bodied young people.

The research demonstrates that local authorities, working with other statutory, voluntary, community and private organisations and young people, are responding actively and imaginatively to the requirement to commission and procure positive activities for young people. The range and variety of approaches being adopted means that it is not possible to conclude this research with a statement of, or prescription for, best practice. The evidence suggests that authorities are taking considered decisions about the most appropriate ways to develop positive activities for young people based on an understanding of young people's needs, the local market and choice of procurement methods.