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Local Authority Commissioning

Understanding the use of information and evidence by commissioners of services

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Executive summary

Evaluation and assessment of service provision is increasingly recognised as important in allowing organisations to learn about, and improve their activities. Local authorities and other service providers face growing pressure to use resources effectively and to demonstrate the impact of services on their communities, in order to obtain funds for and carry on with their provision. In the hope of using resources efficiently and achieving value for money, central and local government authorities are increasingly commissioning partners in the private, public and voluntary sectors to provide public services. The process of commissioning, however, can be difficult to put into practice, requiring commissioners to make judgments about the relative value for money and likely effectiveness of different interventions and competing providers, on the basis of information of variable quality.

NESTA asked RAND Europe to carry out a small piece of exploratory research to examine the types of data and information which Local Authorities draw upon to make commissioning decisions and to investigate how ‘promising practices’ are identified and developed. The research focused on commissioning in the field of community safety, crime and violence, and is based on twenty-three interviews with informants who have a range of roles in the commissioning process, including in Local Authorities, Regional Government Offices and the Home Office.

The RAND Europe team devised a simple framework to describe and conceptualise the types of information which typically feed into the commissioning process. This framework consists of four information types:

- Information on challenges and policy priorities;
- Information or evidence about what works or about promising practices (which may, as yet, be unproven by evaluation) in tackling a particular policy challenge;
- Information about which providers would deliver best value for money; and
- Information utilised in evaluation of interventions.

Whilst we recognise that in practice the distinction between these categories may be blurred, the existing literature tends not to distinguish, conceptually, between these different information types. We think it worth drawing out this distinction between different information types in an attempt to avoid confusing separate elements of commissioning that have distinct implications for value for money.

The key findings from this research are as follows:
Information on challenges and priorities

Interviewees stressed the importance of understanding the unique nature of the challenges in each local authority area
Interviewees stressed that a clear understanding of the nature of local challenges was a crucial first step to effective decisions about service commissioning. This information is collated from a number of sources, including the police, A&E departments and other relevant agencies. This, according to interviewees, is an important element of ‘intelligence-led’ commissioning.

Information about what works

The Home Office Effective Practice Database was used by many interviewees as a source of information about what works
However, examples of ‘good practice’ contained in this database have not necessarily been formally or independently evaluated. The determining factor for inclusion in the database appeared to be the experience, professional and common-sense judgement of the Home Office Effective Practice team. While this is one useful way of making judgement, it is very different from independent evaluation. This raises questions about the role of professional judgement versus evaluation evidence, which merit further discussion by those making such decisions in relation to commissioning.

Informal sources of information were widely utilised for examples of ‘good practice’
CDRPs sought information from each other about ‘good practice’. Contact between CDRPs was facilitated by Regional Government Offices, established between individual practitioners at conferences, and initiated by partnerships themselves. Interviewees also utilised informal networks within and beyond their own local authority, drawing on the opinions and expertise of local practitioners. Peer-reviewed and independent research was noticeably absent from the list of information sources used by commissioners.

Pragmatism drives some commissioning decisions
Often, central government ring-fences funding for a particular intervention, which gives commissioners less flexibility in deciding what may be the most suitable intervention to target a problem in their area. In these cases, there is much less opportunity to draw on and use information on what works. In other instances, time-frames for bidding for and using funding are limited, preventing commissioners from conducting more thorough planning and potentially leading to less evidence-based decisions.

Few interviewees questioned or engaged critically with the concept of ‘good practice’
Many interviewees said that ‘good practice’ refers to practice which was ‘effective’ or shown to have worked in other areas, but did not comment on how such practices had been proved or shown to be effective, nor did they further articulate what was meant by ‘effective’ - effective at achieving improved outcomes for particular groups? Effective at reducing costs? Or effective at achieving follow-on funding through strong reporting mechanisms? The interviews seem to suggest that once the label of ‘good practice’ is applied to an intervention, it is for the most part taken for granted.
Interviewees felt there is plenty of information available about ‘good practice’, even if it can sometimes be time consuming to find
While there was little questioning of the meaning of ‘good practice’ and what it was really able to denote about interventions and approaches, interviewees themselves were broadly satisfied both with the amount of information available about ‘good practice’, and with its quality. Interviewees did mention, however, that time and other resource constraints often prevent them from making use of such sources of information.

Information about service providers
Interviewees reported that generally, they had good information about local service providers, although this information is primarily from informal sources.
Information about providers operating locally mainly came from practitioners’ own knowledge and experience of the local area, although in some areas third sector organisations were represented on various sub-groups of a Local Authority or CDRP. In the absence of external sources of information and validation we were not able to independently assess local commissioners’ perception that they have comprehensive knowledge of local providers. It could be difficult for them to know what they do not know. Thus, it might prove difficult for a new, small provider to gain representation and visibility; they might not easily come to the attention of practitioners, thereby bolstering the competitive advantage of larger, more well-established organisations.

There is a focus on service providers’ track record and previous experience in commissioning decision-making
Interviewees’ comments suggest that Local Authorities pay particular attention to service providers’ ‘track record’ when making commissioning decisions, although it proved hard to unpack what, exactly this meant or how it could be demonstrated. Clearly, information showing a reduction in crime correlated with work by the provider would be evidence of success, but it appeared to extend to information showing that performance targets were met or that users and/or commissioners were satisfied with the service.

Assessment of providers is often limited to fulfilling administrative requirements of the procurement process
Once commissioners knew about a service provider, assessment of that provider tended to primarily arise from the procurement process, focusing on financial and institutional credentials, rather than an assessment of the likely effectiveness of the provider or the intervention in addressing the target social challenges.

Information for and from evaluations
Interviewees expressed a commitment to both performance monitoring and evaluation, but in practice evaluation was not prevalent
Interview findings suggest there was little evaluation being conducted in terms of collecting evidence about the impacts of interventions. Whilst most areas would use simple ‘before and after’ information to evaluate an intervention, predominantly the data collected in order to evaluate commissioned services related to throughput and process rather than outcomes. This type of limited evaluation does not allow assessment of causality; that is, it does not provide insight into whether the intervention itself led to any observed changes,
or whether the changes were caused by other factors. Interviewees were, to some extent, aware of the limits on their ability to carry out evaluations. It is worth noting that lack of evaluation (and the attendant inability to attribute changes in outcomes to the intervention or to other factors) may pose risks to value for money, as it is not possible to know whether the most effective interventions and services are being commissioned.

**There are unresolved questions as to what should ‘count’ as evidence that a particular service or intervention is effective enough to be attempted in another area**

Resources, time, skills and the small scope of many commissioned services mean that full evaluation is at times impossible and often unlikely at the local level.

**There are a number of possible tools and initiatives that could support funders and commissioners of public services in making value for money decisions**

All interviewees were keen to engage with the issue of value for money in commissioned services and the majority took steps in their day-to-day work to seek out information about potentially effective services. Building on practitioners’ willingness to use information, possible initiatives could include enhancing commissioners’ understanding of how to assess what is ‘good practice’, through training or the development of guidance. There is the potential to develop a centralised scheme or fund to enable robust evaluations of local initiatives, thus ensuring that even small, locally commissioned services contribute to the development of an evidence base for future commissioning.