



Building relationships with commissioners

In the past most government funding for voluntary and community organisations was given in the form of grants; now government bodies are commissioning public services. They invite potential service providers to compete for contracts to deliver particular services (both existing and new services). The contracts are available for voluntary, private and public sector organisations to bid for. This is a huge change in the way public services are funded.

The commissioning process¹ involves finding out what local people need, designing and planning services to meet those needs, then 'buying' the services. Unfortunately, there is no standard approach to public service commissioning; this means that the process for commissioning public services in each borough, each Primary Care Trust or for agencies such as Learning and Skills Councils, can be different. To find out more about the process in your local area, the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) is a good place to start.

Reaching and influencing commissioners

Making contact with commissioners can be difficult, but here are some ideas of the kinds of people, meetings and networks that will have an influence on the commissioning process. At some of these meetings, you should have an opportunity to meet commissioners themselves.

- Local Strategic Partnership (LSP): it is especially important to make contact with the voluntary sector representative (LSPs have different names: in Brighton the LSP is called the 2020 community partnership, in Hackney it is called Team Hackney)²
- Sub committees (e.g. children and young people, health, community safety, etc.)
- Local authority councillors
- Local Members of Parliament
- People responsible for domestic violence in a local authority (e.g. Domestic Violence Co-ordinator)
- Equality and Diversity officer
- Multi-agency domestic violence forum (e.g. Camden)
- Neighbourhood forums or partnerships
- Community Empowerment Networks (e.g. Hackney)
- Supporting People Team
- Consultation meetings (Local authority, Primary Care Trust, etc.)

¹ See Women's Resource Centre's guide to commissioning and procurement (available in September 2009)

² See Women's Resource Centre's factsheet on Local Strategic Partnerships

- Citizen's Panel – to consult with local people
- Local Involvement Networks (LINK – new networks of individuals, groups and organisations with interest in health and social care)
- Local GP surgeries
- London Councils forums
- Local authority representative on London Councils grants committee
- Directly elected mayor (3 boroughs only – Hackney, Newham and Lewisham)

Steps in the process:

In order to influence commissioning or be in a strong position to bid for a contract, it is very important to begin preparing as soon as possible.

1. Identify what sort of power and influence you already have:

- What expertise, credibility, independence, access to service users, resources or knowledge do you have?
- What connections and networks do you already have? Who do your MC members, volunteers or service users have links with? What about friends, colleagues, neighbours, local businesses etc.?
- What kind of reputation does your organisation have already? How can you develop a stronger reputation?
- Has your organisation had any positive publicity in the media? How can you raise your profile?

2. Collect information:

Find out about important people and meetings:

- Your local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) should know about any consultations that are taking place and the various local committees that you may want to get involved with. So the CVS is a good place to start.
- Find out who is on the local Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). You can use 'Google' or talk to the local CVS (who often represent the voluntary sector on the LSP)
- Find out which meetings make important decisions affecting your work
- Find out which local authority councillors have influence over your work
- Find out if any councillors are likely to be sympathetic to your cause.
- Research your local authority cabinet (the executive committee of the Council) – find out if any members have an interest in women's issues. Look at the local authority website, where you can find out who the councillors are and who the cabinet members are. You can then 'Google' them to find out their interests.
- Find out who is on the community empowerment network (if there is one) and lobby people who are sympathetic to women's issues
- Find out who the local authority Equality and Diversity officer, and if relevant, domestic violence officer, is – they may be useful contacts for finding out about consultations, commissioning opportunities coming up etc.
- Find out which commissioners are relevant to your area of work. There is a high turnover of commissioners, so this is an ongoing process.
- Find out how the commissioning process works in your local authority or area of work. How do commissioners identify the needs of the community or any gaps in services or local trends? It is very important to get involved with the process as early as possible; so, for example, if the local authority is consulting about the

types of services that are most needed, it is important for you to give your views at this stage.

Find out about important strategies. If you are working in a local area, concentrate on your local authority's strategies; if you are working regionally or nationally, you will need to be aware of national and regional strategies.

- Find out which local, regional and national government strategies relate to your particular area of work e.g. Every Child Matters (national government strategy for children and young people), The Healthcare for London Programme (regional healthcare strategy), local authority community safety strategy
- Each local authority has a Local Area Agreement which outlines the local authority's priorities for a 3-year period. What are the specific priorities for your local area?³
- Local authorities should also have a long term (10-year) strategy called a community strategy. What is the long term strategy of your local authority?
- Find out if there are any government reports or any government or academic research that back up your case?
- If possible, find out about any 'hidden agendas'.

3. Prepare your case:

Women's organisations need to convince commissioners of their case before they even begin to tender for contracts. You are likely to be competing against larger, generic organisations, so as described above, you must be able to clearly explain your organisation's strengths, specialist knowledge and expertise. It is also important to:

- Have strong evidence to show the need for your work (e.g. evidence based on monitoring and evaluation of your own work, independent research that provides evidence of need).
- Show commissioners that your work has positive and long term outcomes for beneficiaries. You can describe your achievements by using case studies, user feedback and evidence from third parties.
- Record (and analyse) information about changes and gaps in local provision affecting your service and your beneficiaries. You will be in a stronger position to tell commissioners about unmet needs, new demands or social trends. This can open up a discussion with commissioners and provide valuable information that they can use for developing their future plans.
- Give so much good evidence that it is difficult for them to say no!
- Link your work to Local Area Agreement targets (e.g. Re: domestic violence, substance misuse, maternity, employment etc.), the local sustainable community strategy, your local authority's gender equality scheme⁴ and relevant government policies. Commissioners are often under pressure to show that their services meet central or local government targets or policies. It is important to show commissioners how your organisation can help the commissioner meet their objectives. You may also be able to show how you can help to reduce their costs and provide extra value.
- Present your case positively: i.e. we know you have a problem and we can help solve it. Be a constructive critic and propose solutions to their problems.

³ Please see Women's Resource Centre factsheet on Local Area Agreements

⁴ See

Remember that you are helping them to meet their objectives as much as they are helping you.

- It is likely that you work with people in the community that commissioners or government funders want to reach. Provide opportunities for commissioners to meet and talk with your service users; this can be a way for them to hear about their experiences and needs, the benefits of your services, and contribute to the development of future services.
- Tailor your message to whoever is in power locally. Depending on whether your local authority has a majority of Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat councillors, you may need to present your case differently to show how you can help them meet their priorities. This may not always be possible but sometimes the way you describe your work can make a difference when seeking the support of local councillors or commissioners.

4. Engage with commissioners or others who have influence on them:

It is important to get involved with the commissioning process as early as possible, so that you can express your views about local needs and the type of local services that are needed.

- Participate in consultation meetings, forums, networks, sub-committees etc. Although this takes time, these meetings can be an opportunity to meet commissioners, raise your organisation's profile and influence policies, strategies and future services. However, it is important to prioritise! You can't get involved in everything, so it is essential to choose meetings where you think you can have the most impact.
- Try to engage with commissioners: invite them to your organisation's events or project visits, ask them to speak at your AGM, involve them in meetings about your area of work (where appropriate) etc. This can help commissioners understand the realities faced by your service users and by staff delivering services.
- Build relationships over time and try to use their language: talk about more than funding; instead, talk about collaboration, partnerships and investment. It is also good to stress your 'added value'.
- Be aware of 'participatory budgeting'. This is a pot of money for local people to decide how to spend (see WRC factsheet) and all public bodies are starting to do this now apart from the police. You may need to get lots of sympathetic people along to meetings to vote and this can be another opportunity to engage with commissioners and local councillors.

Note: Once a tender has been advertised, you must not try to influence or lobby commissioners as this could be seen as trying to gain an unfair advantage and prevent your organisation from being able to bid for a contract.