



Influencing the commissioning process:

First of all, it is important to find out which public bodies might commission work from you (e.g. local authority, local health service, central government department etc.) and which commissioners specialise in your kind of work (e.g. mental health; children, young people and families; Supporting People, etc.).

In some local areas, commissioners are openly trying to engage with voluntary and community organisations, holding consultation meetings and perhaps even offering training and support with their commissioning process. Try to arrange meetings with relevant commissioners and don't be afraid to ask questions!

In other areas, commissioners are very hard to find or communicate with! If this is the case, talk to people in your networks, colleagues in the voluntary sector, the local CVS, other people in your field of work – to find out information about commissioning in your local area. It might take a while, but someone will know.

9 ways to influence commissioners

Adapted from: The Complete Guide to Surviving Contracts for Voluntary Organisations, by Alan Lawrie and Jan Mellor, published 2008

1. Start early

To be effective in influencing commissioning, organisations need to start early:

- Try to get involved in discussions about local needs, the design of services and commissioning process itself
- Find out from the public body where they are in the commissioning cycle so that you can plan ahead
- Build relationships with potential allies (e.g. CVS, local networks/forums, local councillors, etc.) – to make the case for independent local voluntary and community sector services and/or specialist services

2. Be involved in strategy

- Commissioners are aiming to achieve strategic objectives. Find out which strategies and policies are relevant to your work.
- Sometimes, commissioners would like to hear your views and ideas about their strategies and forward plans. This can be a useful way of influencing future priorities.

3. Involve users

Commissioners usually want to talk to service users directly. Often voluntary and community organizations can make it possible for service users and commissioners to meet. This can be an opportunity for service users to talk about their experience, needs and opinions about the services you provide.

4. Identify trends

It is useful to record any changes affecting your service users and the services you provide. For example, perhaps your service users are facing a new problem or there is increasing demand for one of your services from a specific group of women. By telling commissioners about these trends you can open up a discussion with commissioners about needs and future services.

5. Link up with government targets

Often commissioners are under pressure to show that their services meet government targets or policies. It is useful to show commissioners how your organization can help the commissioner meet their targets.

6. Record gaps and unmet needs

Keep records of needs that are not being met. For example, perhaps you provide education for women but many women are dropping out due to lack of childcare provision; or perhaps you have a waiting list for a specific service. By recording this information you will have evidence to back up your case when you talk to commissioners about local needs and future plans.

7. Share experience

Invite commissioners to visit your organisation, attend your events or offer to organise events or training together with them. By encouraging commissioners to see how you work, they will have a better understanding of the realities faced by staff delivering services and the experiences of service users. This is also a good way to open up discussion with commissioners.

8. Produce evidence

It is very important to collect evidence of the outcomes of your services. By showing how your services support people to make significant changes or improvements to their lives, you can present a strong case to commissioners. You can use case studies, service user feedback, letters or quotes from people who work with you, etc. to show successful outcomes.

9. Participate!

Although this takes a lot of time, it is important to participate in consultation meetings, networks and forums relevant to your work. These meetings can be an opportunity to meet commissioners, raise your organisation's profile and influence thinking. However, it is essential to prioritise!

VERY IMPORTANT

Once a contract has been advertised, you can no longer lobby commissioners – this could be seen as giving you an unfair advantage and mean you are not allowed to put in a bid for the contract.

Types of tender procedure

If commissioners decide to fund services through a tendering procedure (instead of a grants process), they can choose different types of procedure. The two most commonly used by commissioners relevant to the women's sector are:

- Open: All those who show an interest and respond to an advert about a potential contract are invited to tender (put in a bid) to deliver a service.

- **Restricted:** All those who show an interest and respond to an advert must meet some initial criteria before they are invited to tender. Usually this involves completing a 'pre-qualification questionnaire' (PQQ). The public body then uses this information to create a shortlist of providers who will be invited to put in a bid to deliver the service.

Another version of a restricted procedure is a 'framework agreement' where the public body advertises its intention to tender for a group or sector of services – the main terms and price of future contracts are outlined (the 'framework'), but there is no obligation on the public body to buy services. A shortlist of 'preferred suppliers' (or 'preferred providers') is drawn up, based on completing a PQQ. The public body can then invite a selection of organisations on the list to tender for a service once it has been defined. This list can run for 4 years – so it can be really important to be on it.

Two other types (not common in the women's sector):

- **Negotiated:** Similar to the above procedures but the public body negotiates the terms of a contract with a shortlist of selected organisations.
- **Competitive dialogue:** Following completion of a PQQ, the public body selects a small number of organisations, visits and talks to each of them in order to define the service specification. Once the specification is finalised, they ask all of them to tender for the service. Used for more complex projects.

Where are contracts advertised?

The best way to find out about commissioning opportunities is through your networks, local voluntary sector email bulletins etc. Contracts will also be advertised through:

- Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS, Voluntary Action)
- Local/regional/national press, Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU)*, trade journals
- Information from Local Strategic Partnership representatives¹
- Information from commissioners
- Websites
 - Local authority e.g. Islington Council
 - Skills Funding Agency www.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk
 - Contracts Finder www.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk
 - CompeteFor (London 2012 opportunities) www.competefor.com
 - London Tenders Portal www.londontenders.org
 - Funding Central fundingcentral@ncvo-vol.org.uk

* Adverts in the OJEU will only be for contracts following the full EU procurement rules.

Please see examples of adverts:

www.wrc.org.uk/resources/help_for_your_organisation/developing_your_organisation/resource_to_accompany_sustainable_funding_guides/adverts.aspx

¹ At the time of publishing this guide, it was not clear yet whether Local Strategic Partnerships will continue or be replaced by another type of local partnership body.