A guide to **commissioning outcomes for young people**

National Youth Agency

The purpose of this guidance from the National Youth Agency (NYA) is two-fold: firstly, to provide a guide for commissioners on how to involve young people in the commissioning process; secondly, to demonstrate how youth work and youth workers could be commissioned to deliver outcomes.

Contents

Acknowledgements

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is grateful to the people who contributed to developing this guide including:

Nigel Ball, Go Lab

Paul Conneely, PSTA

Steve Hillman, Centre for Youth Impact

Louise Smith, Local Government Association

Garath Symonds, RedQuadrant

Introduction

In 2017 the Local Government Association (LGA) launched its Vision for Youth Services, this outlined the role that the LGA believed councils should play in local youth services. The aim was to promote an effective non-formal education offer for young people in light of significant budget cuts and changes to the landscape since 2010. It recognised the increasing role of local authorities in coordinating, rather than directly providing local provision, as well as the importance of effective commissioning and ensuring available services were safe. This guidance intends to support local authorities to implement that vision by identifying the factors that support an effective commissioning process.

The commissioning context for children and young people people's services in England has moved on considerably in the last 10 years. Current concerns about knife crime, poor mental health and the exploitation of young people by adults dominate the youth agenda. We have seen the continued contraction of local authority youth services. For some time now youth services and youth work has been viewed as the domain of the Third Sector by public sector commissioners with the relevance of youth work in the current context still not clear enough.

The 2011 guidance focused on how to commission services for young people and how to involve young people in the process. That participation in the design and implementation of commissioning processes is more important than ever. The context in 2019 is one where councils are endeavoring to commission outcomes and not services, this new guidance responds to that shift of emphasis. This guidance aims to encourage local authority commissioners to involve young people more closely in the process and to consider youth work as one of a range of options, with the key focus on what is the best means of delivery.

What will be covered?

What youth work is, how it works and what its benefits are will be covered. It illustrates a number of contemporary commissioning challenges faced by local authorities; where youth work could deliver the intended outcome. The guidance will also demonstrate how to involve young people in the commissioning process from end to end. Given the somewhat unique position of the Third Sector in the market we will also look at how to commission outcomes for young people from charities and social businesses. An outcomes framework for young people will be illustrated to assist those authorities looking to commission outcomes through a youth service.

Who is the guidance for?

This guidance is for local authority commissioners who wish to engage young people in commissioning, and commission effectively for outcomes. Third Sector providers and Local Authority youth service managers may also find this guidance helpful in relation to their understanding of how commissioning works.

What is youth work?

Youth work provides non-formal education that focuses on the personal and social development of participants. Uniquely, it does this through engagement with young people's culture and their community. Its asset-based approach develops the strengths of the individual and furthers the opportunities available to them.

To provide a comprehensive eco-system of support and opportunity for young people, youth work needs to play a key role. Many young people engage in youth work because it feels different from school and is therefore capable of reaching individuals and communities who may otherwise not engage. Youth work is complementary to formal education, helping prevent the need for more costly intervention services for children and young people.

APPG on Youth Affairs, Youth Work Inquiry,
Final Report, April 2019

Participation in the commissioning process

The following section explains how to involve young people in the commissioning process from end to end. The opportunity for local authorities to do this is significant as there is already wide engagement of young people through student councils, youth councils and care councils that could be built upon to get greater benefit. Involving young people in the commissioning of services for young people can mean services are better informed of the needs of young people, leading to better outcomes as well as better processes. To do this, commissioners may need help, either from their own in-house youth service or by buying the support they need from the market. Facilitating youth participation is a skill and commissioners should get the appropriate support to make this exercise meaningful and safe. The National Youth Agency's Hear by Right is an organisational development tool that offers clear guidance to commissioners on how to develop effective youth participation.

Analyse

Analysing the needs of the people you are trying to help is a fundamental starting point for any commissioning process. When developing a needs assessment, it may be helpful to draw on the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) locally, or to get a national picture. When young people are your target group, talking directly to them delivers more positive and meaningful outcomes. Taking steps to find out what young people think of a short breaks service, for example could help commissioners uncover data they may have otherwise been blind to. Asking young people themselves to find out what other young people think can be a particularly effective way of assessing information relating to needs. In asking young people what they need it will be important to make a discernment between 'needs' and 'wants' and to cross reference what is discovered with other pieces of data such as the views of stakeholders and professionals in the system.

Homelessness is one example of how greater insight can improve commissioning. Understanding why 16 and 17 year olds find themselves sofa surfing or rough sleeping will probably be very useful in preventing homelessness from taking place. Another important question to ask young people might be what happened during a period of homelessness? The point is that we attempt to understand the lived experience of young people; whether related to being homeless, excluded from school or simply their experience of growing up in a place, this can be vitally important to strategic commissioning and place shaping. When we assume we know the needs and experiences of young people, we risk commissioning something that does not work. Involving young people in this foundation of the commissioning process can be greatly assisted by commissioning a piece of research that asks key questions. This leaves the methodology to the market and you concerned with only the result. Activities that we know can work include:

- Online surveys
- Focus groups / group work
- Structured and unstructured interviews
- Ethnography
- Social media

Again, it will be important to pay attention to how this engagement is done, particularly in relation to the use of technology and social media. A well thought out engagement strategy that considers how young people use media will be necessary, it could also be helpful to engage online marketing specialists in this activity. There

may be certain groups that are harder to engage in this way and will need greater consideration and planning. Understanding of the experience of young people should be used to inform the design of the process. This will keep the commission relevant to the target group and more likely to be effective. Be sure though that you understand the needs of young people as a whole, and not just the particular young persons you have in front of you. We know that young people's experiences are diverse and that patterns, trends and themes will emerge that will give greater insight. The information you secure regarding young people's experiences should be treated as one piece of (important) data to be cross referenced with other data as you build a picture of need and insight for a particular cohort.

Defining outcomes

Defining outcomes can be challenging and something the sector as a whole struggles with. A good outcome should describe a change in terms of benefits to people. It needs to be something that people will notice as an improvement in their lives. Outcomes must be measurable or verifiable, with evidence that supports that verification showing that a beneficial change has been delivered.

Outcome based commissioning is a rejection or move away from commissioning services. It means looking at the impact the service has (or should have), even imagining that there are no services and considering, from that perspective, the best means of delivery. For example, rather than commissioning a mental health service, an outcomes commissioner might commission: 'children and young people's emotional wellbeing improves'. A service based approach is still common, but can distract the commissioner from a conversation with the market about outcomes and it removes the market's opportunity to deliver innovation or creativity. Inviting young people to help with the definition of your outcomes can support commissioners to make sense of outcomes from a different perspective; the perspective of those the outcome is intended for. By sharing outcomes with young people, commissioners gain greater understanding and insight into the social change that they are planning to invest in. This insight may be in relation to the outcome or how to deliver it, or greater understanding of the problem the commissioner seeks to address.

Using a workshop approach might be helpful; write up a social problem that the commissioner is keen to tackle and then ask young people what the causes and effects of that problem are. Not all of the responses will be as helpful and some will be absolute pearls of wisdom. By mapping cause and effect it is possible to see what needs to change and what would indicate the change has occurred. 'Causes' can be translated or reframed into outputs and the effects of the problem can be reframed as indicators of success. For example, a cause of youth crime might be limited recreational opportunities for young people locally. An effect of this might be older residents feeling unsafe within a neighbourhood as young people hang around the streets. The output here could be increased recreational opportunities and developmental youth activity, the indicator could be that older residents report feeling safer and the outcome would be reduced offending. This approach gives a richer understanding of the social problem being addressed and the outcome desired for young people. There is as much art as science in defining outcomes and the process should be iterative, testing definitions with young people and professionals as you go. Developing a good theory of change process would help define this. This means being clear about attributions, or the causal relationship between the intervention commissioned and the intended outcome.

Crucially, by involving young people, commissioners get to see the world from young people's perspectives. There will come a point where you'll have to agree the outcome to be commissioned - testing the outcome definition with young people as suggested helps build the confidence that you're moving in the right direction. This testing reassures Members that you're talking and listening to residents and you're more likely to commission something that is logically related to the problem you are trying to address.

Developing options

A commissioner of outcomes would start the process of developing options by setting the challenge: "imagine there are no services" and then ask the question "what is the best means of delivery?" The point of this approach is to enable innovation, to help commissioners re-imagine what could be possible. Asking young people to imagine if there wasn't a service at all and we were starting from scratch - what would you do? This approach can be transformational. Again, this approach might need some expert facilitation and it would give the commissioner yet another lens to see their commissioning challenges through.

An options development workshop might start with the

overall goal or outcome that the commissioner wants to achieve. Then look at what services have been used to do this previously and how effective they've been. The development process could then follow the steps outlined above. Try and make this process as creative as possible, considering the space you use, the materials available, language used, and even the dress code of attendees to ensure the sessions is as young people friendly as possible. At the heart of every target operating model is an idea or theory of change that makes the difference, working in this way with young people will help you get there quicker. How? is a great question to ask young people. You may be surprised at the answers for their simplicity and elegance.

When developing options, decision makers will be interested in how you've appraised the recommended options. Young people are well placed to describe how something might work on the ground, giving commissioners a view from a user's perspective. Testing options with those residents that will be ultimately benefiting from the service provides great data for the options appraisal and will help you make the most informed decision.

Why wouldn't a commissioner involve the intended beneficiary of an outcome in the development of options? One reason might be their disability prohibits their inclusion or you may view involving young people that have offended as too disruptive. These issues can usually be overcome with effective facilitators or the use of advocates or parents. Be certain though that any non-involvement of young people is for good reasons and made after professional advice from practitioners skilled in participation.

Making a decision

We know we get better decisions when the people impacted by the decision are involved in making it. It's also a fundamental principle of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to involve them in the decisions that affect their lives. To ensure that this is truly empowering and not tokenistic professional facilitation can be helpful. It is also heavily written into statutory obligations to consult with young people:

Ofsted's Criteria for all Local Authority Children's Services – see. Para 163 of the Framework at: **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018**

For Care Leavers – see p.7. Of: **(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/683703/Local_offer_guidance_final.pdf)**

For provision of 'positive leisure-time activities' – **www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/507B**

In matters of education: **www.gov.uk/government/publications/listening-to-and-involving-children-and-young-people**

The sorts of decisions that young people should be involved in include the type or nature of the operating model, the features or the characteristics of the service commissioned and the criteria for selecting a provider. Young people can also be involved in the evaluation of bids, why not involve them in scoring? Convince yourself that there is a genuine regulatory reason why this isn't possible before ruling it out. Some young people may be conflicted, for example if they know a bidder and already get support from them. Simply treat this as you would any conflict of interest - the normal rules apply. Involving small groups of young people in the evaluation of tenders and at presentations gives commissioners another source of valuable data about how the potential provider might land. Politicians may have a particular interest in what young people think and might appreciate a briefing on their recommendations if a Member Decision is required.

Delivering

Involving young people in delivery can take three main directions. Firstly, in the monitoring of the contract. This could mean working with young people to design performance indicators and the means of collecting data. Again, engaging young people in this way, asking them how can we monitor progress, could generate considerable creativity.

Young people could be deployed as a Youth Inspection Team, there are many examples of this across the country and it can provide valuable insight and a perspective that is different from adult professionals. Youth Inspection Teams do need support and an in-house youth service or customer engagement team would be well placed to provide it. Commissioners could develop the inspection framework with young people and even commission the inspections as a formal part of contract monitoring.

Another possibility at delivery stage is involving young people in mystery shopping, which can be another source of valuable data. Again the framework for how this works should be developed in partnership with young people and commissioners, and facilitated by practitioners. Employing young people as Apprentices in the commissioning team can support all of this work and enable you to get someone on the payroll who is close enough in age to the user group to give you a different perspective. This has worked well with young people who have experienced care and can also work in commissioning teams. Ensuring young people are safe with any of these activities is a priority.

The second area where young people can be involved in the delivery stage of the commissioning process is co-production. Co-production is often mistaken for co-design or simply as collaboration. Co-production actually refers to the production of services in partnership with users. It also refers to a strengths or assets based way of viewing the commissioning of outcomes. For example, using peer mentors would be an example of co-production, where young people are providing a service for other young people in partnership with professionals. The social and economic benefits of this approach are obvious; again, this type of work is something that needs enabling support to make possible. Peer education is an excellent opportunity for co-production with peer mentoring, mediation and counselling all offering chances for young people to help themselves. Other forms of co-production might include asking young people to provide information and advice for their peers, for example talking about their experience of crime or exploitation as an insight for others. Unemployed young people that have been supported to set up their own businesses that have gone on to employ more young people is another good example of co-production. These approaches take creativity, often cost less than service provision models and have the biggest impact.

Co-commissioning with young people and treating them as equal members of the commissioning process could have revolutionary results throughout the entire commissioning process. This could mean establishing a commissioning board or project board to oversee the process and including young people, perhaps with other key stakeholders to provide governance to the commissioning. With small projects young people's reference groups may get similar results. Co-commissioning should be supported by a training programme that equips young people with the skills and knowledge they would need to be able to meaningfully participate.

Evaluating

Evaluation of how the commission went is an obvious stage to involve users. The trick has to be getting information that will improve outcomes and cost-efficiency in the future. Designing your evaluation method is something that should happen at the same time as defining the outcomes. The key question being: how will we know that this outcome has been delivered? Or what will indicate that we have the intended impact at the end of the commission? Involve young people in your evaluation methodology - ask them what will have changed and how would we know? Make this more relevant to young people by involving them in the design and application of the evaluation.

Understanding impact and learning lessons about implementation should be intrinsic to all commissioning. Commissioning should be a reflection management practice where managers review what they did and learn from it. The benefits of involving young people in this process include getting real insight from intended beneficiaries. Young people will know how to do it better next time as they will have seen and felt the mistakes. Like all work involving young people, in the end it will happen best when it's supported by practitioners skilled in youth participation.

Commissioning better outcomes

Modern commissioners are increasingly interested in commissioning outcomes and a youth service or youth work is not an outcome. However, we know that youth work is effective at improving the lives of young people and benefitting a community, and fits well with an outcome based commissioning approach. What's important is understanding the logical relationship between the intervention used and the intended outcome.

Social care, mental health, public health and special education outcomes are all high on a commissioner's priority list. There is clear evidence that provision of good youth work has positive outcomes that lessens demand in these areas. By using a commissioning lens, a youth service might stop being just a service and become a new means of delivering an outcome as part of a holistic system of services. This reframe will allow local authorities to maximise youth services in relation to the most pressing commissioning challenges.

Set out on the following pages are five examples of those challenges that local authorities are working on for young people. Each challenge is accompanied by a corresponding description of how youth work can be used to deliver the intended outcome. There is also a case study provided for each example to show it could be done.

Commissioning Challenges

Family breakdown

Family breakdown can result in young people going into care. This is often as a result of conflict at home with parents and siblings. Young people may be presenting behaviour at home that parents are unable to cope with and can end up 'sofa surfing', in care or in poor alternative accommodation such as a B&B. The commissioning outcome in this context would be to keep the family together, assuming no abuse is taking place. Young people tend to get better outcomes when they stay with their family of origin and the cost to the local authority is dramatically reduced. The interventions in cases like this, which will all have their own complexities, will be diverse. One option to be considered is youth work. Youth workers can help young people come to terms with their feelings and re-frame their situation with them. Youth workers are able help young people manage conflict and develop the social intelligence to make the transition to adulthood, equipping young people to manage the relationships in their lives. Youth workers are specifically trained in these skills, and can be particularly effective in building all-important stable and continuous relationships. The capabilities young people can develop from this relationship can contribute towards making family breakdown less likely.

Commissioning intention

Support young people to more effectively manage themselves and conflict at home.

Example

Youth & Community Workers could be commissioned to prevent family breakdown, where conflict in the home with parents or foster carers is the key issue. Adult youth workers are uniquely positioned to mediate in this context and able to relate equally to both parents and young people. The deployment of youth workers in this way is often best for the young person, as where others may prioritise obvious outcomes such as a return home, a youth worker will prioritise what is best for the young person. This would involve addressing the root cause of a conflict not just the presenting behaviour. The mediation is more impactful when supported by a non-formal education (youth work) process that helps a young person grow and develop; regulate their emotions and more effectively respond to conflict. By working with the young person and not a subscribed outcome, the youth worker is able to facilitate a sustainable solution. Preventing family breakdown, where young people are supported to stay at home will mean better social outcomes and reduced financial costs.

Youth workers are often more likely to be trusted by families as not being part of 'the system' and not taking 'sides' which can allow a more family-centred approach that is vital to stabilising the household. In successful cases families often comment that success is often due to youth workers not having the same stigma attached to them as statutory children's services. In unsuccessful cases, the youth workers retain contact with the young people to offer support whilst they are transitioning into temporary or supported accommodation and beyond – this single point of contact being essential where multiple agencies are involved.

Looked-after child Placement Stability

An important commissioning challenge for local authorities is preventing children in care from moving from a placement because a residential carer or foster carer is unable to cope with a young person's behaviour. This is a significant problem as it compounds the sense of poor attachment that young people in care are likely to already feel. The reasons for a placement breakdown are often the same as family breakdown. In the case of some young people going into care in their adolescence, the challenges with behaviour and conflict never get resolved. The consequence of this significant instability in their latter childhood makes transition to adulthood very difficult. The relational approach of youth workers can be transformational in these cases. Youth workers are able to stabilise the relationship young people have with themselves and others and could help with this important outcome. Again, it may be important to look at the whole system and what is happening, and a systemic approach should not preclude one-to-one work with a young person.

Commissioning intention

Improve placement stability

Example

Amy was 12 years old and living in foster care in the Midlands. For a number of years, she had suffered significant trauma and had got used to 'bottling up' her associated emotions and not talking to her foster carer for fear of being thought of as a 'bad person'. She frequently had emotional and sometimes violent outbursts at home and this was starting to put the placement at risk.

Amy was very upset that a new young person in the home had befriended one of her friends at her own birthday party, with the result being that her friend now often ignores Amy, instead socialising with the new person.

A youth worker was delivering sessional support to Amy at the time and noticed that something was upsetting her. She developed an activity involving make-up and hair styling - something Amy was interested in. The activity created an informal environment that allowed Amy to discuss what was going on at home and helped her understand her feelings of rejection and abandonment. The youth worker was also able to talk to the foster parents with Amy's permission to relay some of what was going on for her. This intervention significantly reduced the likelihood of placement break down.

Child Sexual Exploitation

In the 2014 report by Professor Alexis Jay on the Rotherham CSE tragedy one council service received positive feedback: the youth service. The Rotherham Youth Service project, Risky Business, was singled out and praised for its approach and effectiveness. A youth worker's impartiality, the fact that they are both of and outside to the statutory system positions them uniquely to engage young people when other interventions fail. A youth worker's ability to work on the street and in other informal community settings allows them to reach out to young people who would ordinarily be missed. Youth workers could also play a greater role supporting the rehabilitation of CSE victims. Helping young people with the development of their identity is central to the youth work curriculum and a key issues for victims of CSE who may not see themselves as victims at all.

Commissioning intention

Prevent CSE Rehabilitate CSE victims

Example

In Halifax, one of the detached youth work teams has been working with young women for 15 years, one of whom initially disclosed abuse within the family. Subsequently this young person disclosed that in fact she was a victim of CSE. With the support of the youth work team that young women went to court, and three men were prosecuted, not just for offences against her, but also for offences against other young people. Key to this disclosure was the trusting, non-judgmental relationship built over a number of years between a youth worker and a young woman. This trust not only facilitated the disclosure, it also provided the support the young woman need to go to court. Detached youth workers in Halifax have built impactful relationships with young women, meeting them not just on their terms but in the streets of their own community. This community development intervention is unique to youth work and can have dramatic results. The young woman in this example, now in her early twenties is now training to become a youth worker herself.

Poor mental health

Commissioning Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has moved on significantly in recent years with more innovative approaches being used. However, long waiting times for clinical interventions still persist. The opportunity to use relational youth work to help young people with depression and anxiety are considerable. Youth work is a less expensive commissioning option that complements alternative therapies and acute services. For example, by encouraging young people to attend appointments. Youth work has also been used with great success to address many psychologically based issues, such as obesity, substance misuse, self-harming, eating disorders and other body image issues.

Commissioning intention

Improve emotional wellbeing

Example

Having been passed as fit for work despite suffering from multiple barriers, including autism, Michael was struggling to cope with the demands of Universal Credit. The change in the benefit systems affecting his previous routine and exacerbating his anxiety.

The anxiety was compounded by the fact that Michael wanted to contribute to the family household which was on a low-income. Being unable to contribute not only dented his already low confidence it also increased his anxiety. Eventually, Michael was referred to the youth service for support.

After an initial meeting in a local café with a youth worker, Michael started to attend one-to-one sessions (he was uncomfortable in group situations). It quickly became clear that he was less suited to certain kinds of work and he was encouraged to participate in a social action project of gardening and making products from wood. This volunteering experience taught him new skills and was conducted in an environment in which he was able to see a product of effort and increasingly trust those who were tutoring him in gardening and woodwork.

Some months on from this initial meeting, Michael now has been able to work with a local firm learning gardening and landscaping. He has earned enough to support his family; a huge milestone and one that confirmed his ability to himself. Whilst he still suffers with anxiety and some claustrophobia, being outdoors with a small number of people, and seeing reward for his efforts, means he can cope far better than if he was in a typical office environment.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

The cost of SEND support is a major challenge to local authorities as the needs of this group of children and young people can be very specialist and therefore expensive. A key issue is inclusion, where a young person is able to manage a mainstream school or college close to their home they should be supported to so. The evidence shows that when this is the case young people do better educationally and are more independent. This provides better outcomes for the young person and it costs the local authority less. All too often school exclusion can result in young people moving to increasingly specialist provision. It may be that with support in the classroom early on, this escalation could be avoided and youth workers are well placed to help. Two other examples are independence travel training, with youth workers supporting young people from Year 6 to travel to school independently. This can result in considerable financial savings for the council and young people being better equipped to live independently. Youth workers have also been commissioned to support young people's inclusion in day provision – avoiding costly residential education and again this promotes independence.

Commissioning intention

Increase educational inclusion

Example

In one county in the south of England there is a programme of youth work support in an academy for 11 to 18 year olds. Students on the programme benefit from a curriculum that is a blend of formal education and personal and social development. Youth workers are deployed three days per month to work with a selected group of young people identified by the school as having additional learning needs.

The programme focuses on skills to improve communication and provides a forum for the young people to discuss the issues they have experienced in school. This conversation about experiences is often concerned with conflict involving other students and staff. The youth workers encourage and challenge the young people in relation to how they handled these situations. This intervention gives young people the opportunity to reflect safely on their behaviour and choose another way - crucially without judgement from others.

How to engage the youth market

For the purposes of this guidance the 'youth sector market' is split into two. Firstly, the in-house market. This might like look a Youth Service, a Youth Offending Team and Integrated Youth Support Team. Some authorities will also have an Edge of Care Team or even a team focused on employability. These in-house assets should be viewed as a marketplace that commissioners can commission from. Public Health outcomes are one area where these services could make a significant contribution. Targeted youth services can make significant contributions to addressing the wider determinants of health as they are often designed to tackle drug misuse, offending behaviour and youth unemployment. Commissioning can sometimes be seen as being about services external to the council. In the case of youth services, and more widely services for young people, that can mean missing out on key resources, capacity and expertise that can help commissioners to deliver outcomes. In procurement terms it's tricky, if not impossible to treat in-house services as you would an external supplier. However, in pre-procurement it is good practice to appraise in-house services against external alternatives. This wider view of your youth sector market gives you more options and leverage over price and should be considered when tackling challenges. Why not get some youth managers in to discuss some of the commissioning challenges you face? It's these diverse perspectives that lead us to the innovative solution.

The second major area of the market is the Third Sector, which is a vital market place for youth work and youth services. Commissioners looking to use youth services to deliver outcomes will inevitably engage the Third Sector. This is a very diverse market place that includes small local community groups run by volunteers, and national social businesses like Barnardos or Catch22 which turnover in excess of £100 million each year. In between these two ends of the spectrum are various small and medium sized organisations capable of having real impact and mobilising rapidly in local areas. Small community groups and even medium size voluntary sector organisations are unlikely to employ dedicated fundraisers and business development executives, and are unlikely to be tracking tender opportunities or be on frameworks. For commissioners to know these groups and have a connection with them will mean potential excellent small providers won't get bypassed by a procurement process that is aimed at larger organisations.

To engage this market effectively to provide the outcomes you're looking for there are five key tips

1 Be clear about what you want

This means articulating a clear and focused description of your intended outcomes. Describe the result you want for young people, why it's important and how we will know it has been delivered. Avoid specifying the service and instead describe service characteristics. For example, describe a specific target group of young people. Other features might include an expectation that services are local, or integrated or preventative. These commissioning intentions signal to the market the sort of service features you're looking for whilst stopping short of specifying a service.

2 Be proportionate in the level of paperwork required

When dealing with big charities who understand public procurement this probably won't matter. However, sometimes local authorities don't differentiate between big social businesses and small organisations that turnover less than £100K per year, sometimes much less. If your market is made up of a number of small organisations then consider whether you need everything that you're asking for. The procurement and safeguarding regulations are important instruments to assure commissioners that providers are safe. However, care should be taken to avoid over-engineering processes that can become prohibitive for small charities to bid.

3 Talk to the bidders

Small and medium sized charities may not always have people whose job is specifically to decipher bids; the CEO may also be responsible for business development. These are organisations that often work on small margins and will appreciate a human touch. It's also important to maintain communication throughout the process, not just during procurement but early on - involving the market at the earliest opportunity will help the market understand what outcomes you want and how they might need to reshape themselves.

4 Meet your own deadlines

The cost of sale is a concern to all businesses, social or otherwise. Charities will invest in the commissioning processes and when councils don't keep to their own deadlines it can cost significantly. There are resource costs or losses that could make a substantive difference to a charity and may deter any future bids from them. Development funding as a catalyst for innovation and stimulating the market may be helpful. This approach can see new providers enter a market with a different offer and different cost structure.

5 Be clear and open about constraints

In order for charities and their trustees to make bidding decisions it's important that they understand the constraints clearly from the outset - this avoids costly effort on work they cannot afford to do. For example, be clear about any employee or property related liabilities. Small charities and social businesses will be very interested in TUPE implications and how to make an assessment of any risk quickly. If you require savings in the latter years of the project be clear about that from the outset. Delivering efficiency savings is completely possible for the Third Sector and is best supported by an open and collaborative conversation about how it could be done. As cash contracts the Third Sector may be able to assist the transition to accessing latent community assets or social capital in a way that other sectors cannot. Having a conversation about how this can be achieved will improve your commissioning approach.

The key thing to remember is the Third Sector is very diverse and it's easy to make assumptions. Like any market strategy communication is vital, keep an open channel and even take a look at their work by visiting the charity, this may also be a chance to meet trustees and non-executive directors.
One important task of commissioning is brokering relationships and new partnerships. In the Third Sector this can be particularly helpful and might include the promotion of a consortium to take on a large contract or a partnership with the private sector to help get bring together commercial expertise and community benefit. One example of this is the Surrey Youth Consortium. This partnership of eleven small Third Sector groups came together as a consortium to deliver a significant county council youth service. The commission involved the use of 35 youth centres and a retained employment model that avoided TUPE making the model more attractive to both the market and council staff.

Outcome-based contracting and Social Impact Bonds

An outcome based contract should simply set out the social change you would like to see, along with a measure of quantity. This involves no prescription of input or output at all. This approach will need considerable work with the market and you may need to clearly give permission to use different approaches.

Even in the context of outcome based commissioning you might opt to specify and pay for an input or an output. However, there are times when you might want to consider paying for the outcomes, in addition to or instead of the inputs. There have been many experiments with this form of "paying for outcomes" or "outcome buying" over the past years, including in youth commissioning (particularly family breakdown, stability for looked-after children, mental health, SEND, and youth employment). These are innovative approaches and there has been mixed success, particularly as they can be complex. However, many commissioners are persisting due to the potential benefits. Outcome based contracting is worth considering when:

- it is difficult to specify the input in enough detail to give comfort about what is being delivered;
- it is unclear what might be the best way to deliver the outcome;
- the outcome is delivered by multiple departments or organisations who need to work together to deliver it;
- the intention is intended to prevent negative outcomes or costs in the future, but these savings are not guaranteed;
- it is felt that financial incentives will help to get quality and performance from the service;
- some degree of innovation is expected from the new service, requiring flexibility during delivery.

When paying for outcomes, there is typically a lag time between when the work is done and when the desired outcome can be observed, and is paid for by the commissioner. This lag time can leave provider organisations strapped for cash. In this instance, social investment can be used. This is a form of repayable finance which looks for social benefit alongside financial returns. When social investment is combined with an outcome-based contract, it is called a "social impact bond" (though note that it is not a "bond" in the ordinary sense!).

For further information, resources and guidance in relation to outcome based contracting, social impact bonds and collaborative commissioning, the Government Outcomes Lab or GO Lab is a helpful point of reference. GO Lab are part of the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford and specialise in research into outcomes based commissioning.

Commissioning youth work and youth services

This guidance has deliberately avoided referring to the commissioning of youth services in an effort to demonstrate the application of youth work to a range of commissioning challenges that local authorities experience. However, even in the context of outcome based commissioning it is ok to commission an input or an output: a service. It's ok when the commissioner understands the whole system and the relationship between input, output and outcome. In commissioning attribution is vital, if you know that a particular type of intervention works and will deliver your outcome then why not commission it. For example, if multi-systemic therapy evidentially prevents entry to care for some young people, then buying it doesn't mean that you're not commissioning outcomes, it just means you've taken the time to understand attribution.

Not all outcome based commissioning means going to the market with an intended outcome completely open about the means of delivery. Commissioners should care about what works, but not at the expense of the outcome. A request might be as clumsy as "outsource the youth service" and this does not have to mean simply transferring the service to a Third Sector organisation big enough to take it on. For commissioners looking to move youth services out of the council; the first consideration has to be why. Why will this service be more likely to thrive outside of the council? The second consideration is to identify what outcomes you want to generate from this service. It may be that the health and wellbeing of 11 to 14 year olds is a primary concern of the council, or the exploitation of 12 to 17 year olds by older adults is the priority. In commissioning a youth service be sure to point the service at an outcome or strategic goal of the council/partnership. In doing this the 'youth service' becomes another delivery vehicle to be commissioned, and the conversation is about how to deliver outcomes to young people and not how to provide a youth service.

There is nothing wrong with emergent youth work - where workers work with whatever emerges with young people. In the current local authority context of significant regulation and austerity this has been hard to sell and we have seen many councils divest themselves of youth services. Modern local authority youth services should always be commissioned. This doesn't mean provided externally to the council, it does mean based on an understanding of the needs of young people and a clear set of outcomes. If local authority youth services are going to be sustainable these outcomes must be relevant to the council's overall vision.

If the decision has been made to externalise the youth service, commissioners should assure themselves that they understand need and outcomes first. Clear commissioning intentions are always helpful in order to communicate how you see the market developing and the features or the characteristics of the service / system. For example, three commissioning intentions might be: Local, Integrated and Preventative. These are not so much outcomes, more features of the service that the commissioner would like to develop. In doing this it sends another signal that you would like to see services that are delivered locally and benefit local young people, that are integrated and joined up with other statutory services and interventions that are preventative. Rather than over prescribe services in long specifications, service features might support creativity and innovation in the market place. Prevention is often desirable and youth work and youth services have huge capacity to prevent social problems. When commissioning prevention, it's important to be clear about the event you are seeking to prevent: e.g. school exclusion, teenage obesity or drug use. It's also helpful to be able to identify the target group most likely to experience that event if there is no intervention. Finally, define the indicator or success measure that will verify that the event has been prevented by the intervention that you have commissioned.

An analysis of the market will help work out which providers could take on the service or if a partnership needs to be brokered. One approach might be to go to market for an Innovation Partner, to develop the service together. Your analysis of the market will inform the market strategy. It may be that local providers have little interest or capacity to take on your commission, this will mean looking at neighbouring local authority areas or to national charities. The work pre-procurement stage is vital to inform your market strategy and involves considerable communication with potential providers. If your local market is made up of numerous local organisations your market strategy may involve breaking the offering up into various lots, in order to appeal to organisations with a defined geographical reach. The key is to avoid simply designing what you want on paper and pushing out an invitation to tender without engaging stakeholders first. One market strategy that may be appropriate is the establishment of a new vehicle to deliver your youth services. There are a number of examples of this up and down the country such as youth mutuals, and young people's foundations as well as CICs. A thorough options appraisal should illuminate these potential vehicles and support decision making.

The Impact of youth work

Measuring the impact of youth services and youth work should be based on outcomes. A commissioner should avoid commissioning youth services and try and commission improved outcomes for young people. In this sense there is no difference to measuring the impact of youth work to any other intervention, the focus is on the outcome and not the service. However, it's important to appreciate that youth work is a relational intervention, the way a youth worker facilities change with a young person is through a relationship. Measuring the impact of a relationship in isolation of all the other relations a young person will have makes attribution tricky. Given this, it may be helpful to work with a theory of change and to utilise qualitative data. For example, the hypothesis may be that 'improving young people's conflict management skills will reduce the likelihood of family breakdown for 15 to 17 year olds'. The activities of the intervention would be designed and delivered around this theory. In the absence of sophisticated research methodologies, attribution might still be tricky. Therefore, to make your commissioning decision contestable, a logic model that supports the theory of change might be useful. A logic model would set out that if X happens Y will follow, the commissioner then might want to monitor the quality of X and the relationship between X and Y. For example, if the outcome is 'children and young people's emotional wellbeing increases' then the intervention could be relational youth work. In commissioning terms, a business case would have to be agreed at options appraisal stage that demonstrates the causality between relational youth work and improved emotional wellbeing. Given that this is accepted, the commissioner may commission youth work with the objective of increasing young people's wellbeing and monitor the quality of the intervention. This assumes that the 'theory of change' or causality is accepted, i.e. youth work increases children and young people's emotional wellbeing.

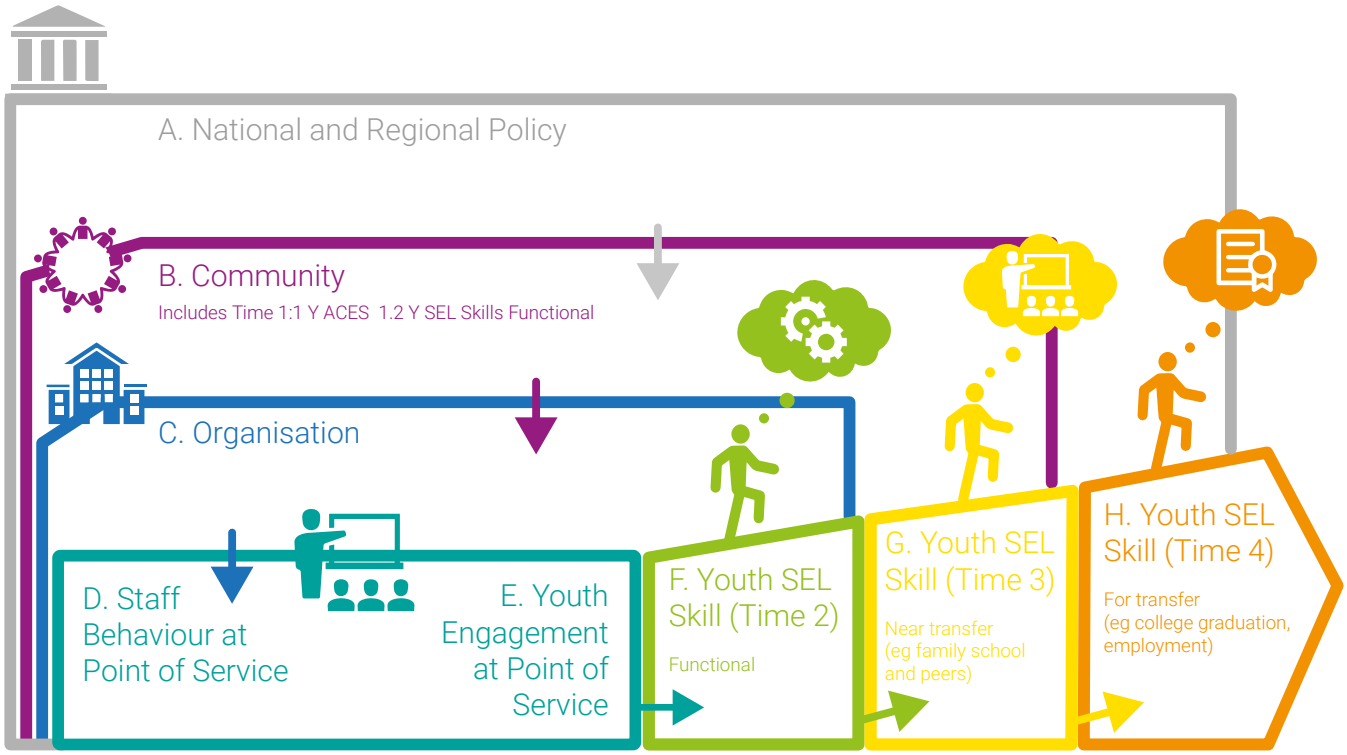
This way of commissioning outcomes requires commissioners to make some assumptions like, "we assume that this intervention will have that impact". It may be that proving a causal relationship is scientifically impossible, yet there is a huge body of research evidence to support the utility of a particular intervention. The youth sector has wrestled with this paradox for years, knowing that youth work can often make a difference when other approaches fail, but not being able to prove it. Interestingly, this burden of proof is not equally applied to all interventions, proving that social work is the thing that made a difference to a child's safety or that teaching was the instrumental factor in a child's education may be equally as challenging. The relational, informal and voluntary aspect of youth work is both why it works and why it is difficult to prove that it works. However, using qualitative methodology to evidence outcomes can help to overcome these challenges and strengthen this proof. There is a huge body of research that suggests youth work is impactful, particularly with young people who feel marginalised or vulnerable. The Centre for Youth Impact is an excellent place to find this evidence when putting together a business case for youth work as a social intervention.

When developing a business case for a youth work intervention, referencing this body of knowledge can be helpful. Independent quality assurances are also helpful; the new NYA Quality Mark is a great example of a standards / quality framework that can assure commissioners that what they have commissioned is of high quality. Attributing the intervention to the outcome will be a judgement made on the balance of probability. The following questions may help: Is the intervention high quality? Are we working with the right target group? Are the benefits being understood and demonstrated to stakeholders? If the answer to these three questions is yes, then you're on the right track.

An outcomes framework for young people

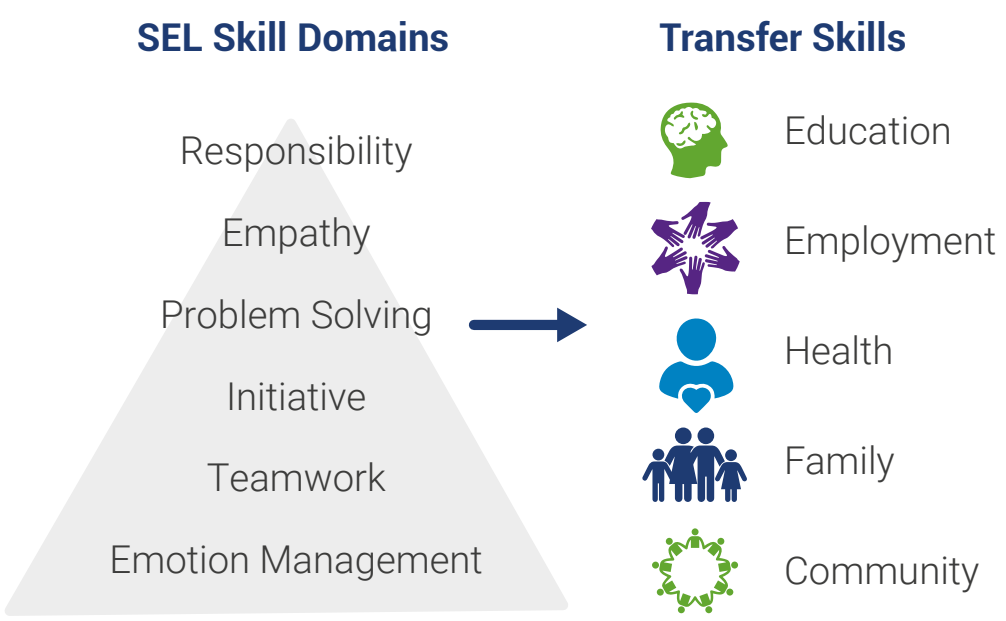
Evaluating outcomes effectively is not easy, and commissioners should acknowledge this, building in proportionate resources to contracts for robust outcome monitoring. In the context of reduced funding, it is not easy to divert money from frontline delivery; councils have a responsibility to their younger residents to ensure high quality services, and contributing to a good evidence base that allows rigorous scrutiny of services is one way to support this. A clear outcomes framework, which is effectively used to monitor the impact of a service at key milestones via robust reporting and measurement systems, can help commissioners to spot where things aren't working and provide opportunities to make changes where needed. It can also support evidence of collective impact across the system, helping to ensure that everyone is working together toward the same outcomes.

The Centre for Youth Impact have developed the Outcomes Framework 2.0 for young people, identifying the key capabilities that people need to make a successful and healthy transition from childhood to adulthood, the experiences within provision that young people need to achieve these outcomes, and the key staff practices that underpin these experiences. Outcomes Framework 2.0 was commissioned by The Local Government Association (LGA), following the publication of 'Bright Futures: Our Vision for Youth Services' in late 2017. LGA is particularly keen to use the outcomes framework to support the development of a common language between commissioners and providers of services to young people, to improve commissioning practice and better meet the needs of young people in local areas.



Outcomes Framework 2.0 takes a more holistic view of how young people develop capabilities, attitudes and positive foundations. There is a strong evidence base to show that young people are more likely to develop positive attitudes, foundations and capabilities when they are engaged with settings and experiences where:

- They have positive relationships with peers and adults;
- They trust and are trusted/respected;
- They feel safe and secure;
- They are positively challenged, have a sense of purpose and achievement
- They feel a sense of enjoyment – both fun and deeper satisfaction
- They have a sense of connection with their communities
- They are empowered to create change in their lives and the world around them



The experiences and services provided for young people are more likely to lead to positive capabilities if they include these elements. In summary, commissioners and providers should:

- Be clear about the capabilities they want and expect young people to achieve, and why this is important to the funder and young people.
- Understand how the services or activities they are commissioning intends to improve or enhance young people's own abilities to strengthen their capabilities
- Plan to create environments where young people can build positive foundations that will support their development

Practice based commissioning

Outcome based commissioning has yet to fully establish itself in the public sector management landscape and it may already be time to re-think it. In the context of services for children and young people it might be that all outcomes have a single source: practice. Relational practice with young people whether the practitioner is a teacher, social worker, psychologist, nurse or youth worker is central to the creation of outcomes. Providing a homeless young person with a home, or an unemployed young person with a job might be necessary, but it may not be sustainable unless these young people are supported relationally. The development of self-esteem, social skills and emotional wellbeing are the things that will mean that a young person will be able to maintain that tenancy or hold down that job. In this frame, 'practice' might be the vital step towards outcomes that commissioners are neglecting. If all social outcomes are created through practice based interventions, then could the role of commissioners be to create an environment where practice thrives?

This new lens doesn't mean forgetting outcomes, it means reflecting on how your outcomes are created. What is the theory of change? What are the conditions under which practice is most likely to be effective? This approach applies a closer partnership between practice leaders and commissioners. A close partnership involves a creative conversation about how our intended outcomes can be delivered at a micro level. Understanding practice enables the commissioning of outcomes by bringing the commissioner closer to the process of change that actually makes the difference. Youth work is a widely misunderstood intervention, knowing how the process works will mean commissioners will be better able to commission youth work to deliver the outcomes they seek.

Further opportunities arising from developing a shared vision for youth services in the area are those of joint commissioning and potentially aligned or pooled budgets. Where outcomes are shared by a range of partners, working with those partners to commission and deliver services that meet those shared objectives is more likely to result in more joined-up, efficient services for young people alongside economic benefits.

Where to find further help

If you need any further advice or support in relation to this guidance please do contact one of the agencies listed below:

National Youth Agency
www.nya.org.uk

NYA offer strategic service review support to Local Authorities to raise professional standards and improve outcomes for young people tailored to meet local needs. NYA has an unrivalled network of youth service experts bringing a blend of specialist skills and knowledge to all our work, including directors of children's services, Ofsted inspectors, Heads of Service and subject matter experts. NYA can help you with:

- Commissioning better outcomes and quality
- Service review and development
- Bespoke training and development
- Needs assessments and service planning
- Quality assurance and impact

Local Government Association
www.local.gov.uk

Public Service Transformation Academy
www.publicservicetransformation.org

The Centre for Youth Impact
www.youthimpact.uk

Go Lab
www.golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk

National Body for Youth Work

www.nya.org.uk

@natyouthagency

Registration No. 2912597 | Charity No. 1035804

National Youth Agency