

Involving people in commissioning services – A guide

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1. The guide

This guide has been produced for anyone involved when organisations identify services they need to provide or buy from others for local people to use. You may be an employee of one of these organisations, who has been asked to help commission (buy) a service. You may be a member of the community, who is getting involved in making decisions about services.

The guide doesn't reproduce all the helpful information available elsewhere, but provides signposts to it through links to other web pages. It is 'live' and continuously updated online, so comments, suggestions and case studies are always welcome – click [here](#) to contact us.

The guide was developed by a co-production team of community representatives and Norfolk County Council staff.

The words and definitions used here are:

- Commissioning – identifying needs and enabling or purchasing services
- Community – a group of people with an interest in services (whether they use them or not) – for example communities of place, identity, experience, interest or purpose
- Service users – people (and those who support them) who use services
- Engagement – the overarching word for informing / consulting / involving / co-producing / empowering (the 'ladder of participation')
- Co-production – earlier, more continuous and more equal involvement

Using the guide...

- This guide should be read alongside any relevant documents produced by the organisation/s you are working for or with – for example commissioning strategies and community engagement strategies

- Organisations have ultimate responsibility for the delivery of services they commission and they will sometimes need to make decisions that are not favoured by everyone involved in the commissioning process. They may need to balance factors such as need, cost and benefit because of wider strategic issues or an unexpected change in circumstances. Using this guide will help you to keep everyone informed along the way, so they understand the context and any constraints or risk imposed by changes which may be beyond an organisation's control
- Use the guide to check that existing ways of working are consistent with it or to help develop new ways of working
- This guide sets out key principles and signposts further information. You can dig down as much as you need to.
- If you get stuck or want more advice and support, ask the organisation/s you are involved with

Where are you at? If you want to find out how much your organisation or service reflects current thinking on community engagement, try using the [New Economics Foundation self-reflection tool](#)

Why have a guide?

To help us all get the benefits that come from effective engagement in commissioning, including:

- Better services, informed by more expertise and experience
- A better focus on outcomes and the bigger picture, rather than a narrow focus on delivery
- Wider 'ownership', with more people involved in decision-making
- Cost savings through efficiencies and getting it right first time

Because there is more commissioning...

- Many public bodies are moving away from the direct provision of services towards commissioning - by assessing needs and buying or enabling services from other providers
- Some public services have been commissioning for years (often jointly with partner organisations) and many of these have been involving service users in the process. Other services have less experience. People have said they would like more guidance
- Organisations may work to different commissioning frameworks, but involving people is key to effective commissioning and there needs to be a more consistent approach

Because more service users and members of the community are involved in commissioning...

- Involving more people in commissioning is becoming 'business as usual' - it starts with the vision and analysis stages and is continuous during the process
- More commissioners are now 'co-producing' with the community – a partnership at all stages, not just at some key points. Appendix 1 shows this in a diagram
- Individual service users are increasingly taking responsibility for commissioning their own services through personal budgets. Some community groups are taking on the ownership and management of services

2. Quick start

What is commissioning? See Appendix 1

Top Ten Tips for involving people in commissioning:

1. Recognise that involving people really does make a positive difference
2. It's cheaper and easier if you make it 'business as usual'
3. Find out what others have done and learn from good practice
4. Talk to others before you start, for example those with more experience or specialist teams such as procurement and programme management
5. Plan, plan, plan – and identify the resources you need early on
6. Involve people from the start (including vision and scoping) and at all stages
7. Involve people on their own terms – what, when, where and how – ask them
8. Listen to those who contribute and use their input
9. Feed back on what changed as a result of people's involvement
10. Celebrate success, share and learn from good experiences

3. WHY involve

The benefits

- More knowledge of what people and communities need and expect
- A better focus on outcomes and the bigger picture, rather than a narrow focus on delivery
- Improved outcomes (such as meeting needs, effective targeting, fairness and value for money) because services are co-designed with people who have experience of using them
- Right first time - helps to minimise costs and waste
- People likely to be more satisfied with services
- Increased public trust in more accountable organisations
- Legislation and an organisation's aims and policies are met (and evidenced)
- A more consistent approach to engagement
- Staff increasingly skilled at high quality engagement and recognising the benefits it brings

Overcoming the potential barriers

“It costs too much”

- Understand how to tailor engagement activities to be appropriate, fit for purpose and good value for money – look at all the options
- Draw up a realistic budget for engagement
- Recognise the potential savings in reducing waste, duplication, handling complaints etc.

“It takes too long”

- Making engagement 'business as usual' will help you manage expectations about realistic timescales
- Start thinking about engagement from day one and build it into your plans

- If the timeframe is not in your control and too short, get advice on engagement methods to suit the circumstances

“I feel as though my professional judgement is devalued or questioned”

- The experience and insight of other people will complement your own
- Welcome challenge and don't take it personally – collaborative working can be very satisfying, but not if people are too defensive
- Engagement can develop new and valued professional skills

“It's hard to find people from some communities and make sure they can take part on an equal footing”

- Use the help available to find the right people and to make your engagement inclusive. Engage with people on their own terms – go to them. See the [Your Voice](#) website, for example. Peer researchers are another option
- Not everything you do needs to have full representation from all the different communities – you just need to be clear about who is/is not involved and why

“Involving people makes it more complicated – there can be conflicts of interest, political sensitivities and difficult situations”

- Yes, sometimes, but these should not stop you involving people. You should be clear about how rules will affect decision-making, follow advice on managing conflicts of interest, be open about sensitivities and ask people with good communication skills to help if you need extra support

WHY top tips

- Recognise that involving people really does make a positive difference – write a list of the costs and potential benefits, to help you make the case to others if necessary. Check that the benefits have been achieved, at the end
- Write the principles of engagement into service strategies, policies, commissioning frameworks, plans and procedures
- Make sure everyone understand the benefits and keep communicating them
- Be a champion for engagement at all times
- Identify potential barriers and look for constructive ways of overcoming them

4. WHEN to involve

What circumstances?

Look at how you can involve people at all four stages of the commissioning cycle:



Analyse

The Analyse stage is about getting a good understanding of the bigger picture eg producing a strategy for older people or commissioning research into the transport needs of young or disabled people. You could involve people in sharing knowledge, setting priorities, conducting or taking part in research.



Plan

The Plan stage is more detailed work to turn the commissioning plan into action eg identifying a need to look at ways to encourage more people from ethnic minorities to visit museums or designing an outreach service which will help older people to remain independent in their own homes. You could involve people in a planning workshop to design a new service, writing a service specification.



Do

The Do stage is about buying, accessing or organising the service eg sending out a tender for providing a debt advice service. You could involve people in deciding how to choose a service provider (and in choosing them), setting quality standards.



Review

The Review stage is about checking that services are doing what they are supposed to be doing (meeting need, value for money, quality and the commissioning targets). You could involve people in gathering feedback through customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping.

Why the pictures?

Some services are very experienced at accessible communications – think about how you can use things like this in your own engagement work!

Are there circumstances when you would not involve people?

Not really – start by assuming that you will and don't leave it to the end, just to tick a box. There might be times when it seems less appropriate to involve people. The list below gives some examples and what you should ask yourself if any of these apply. If you don't involve, you should be clear about the reason why and be prepared to explain your decision.

“The project is coming to an end and most of the work has been done”

Are there still things to do where people could usefully contribute? Can we involve people at a later stage eg when we review the services.

“Decisions have been taken”

Are there some decisions which people can still influence?

“It's not clear that people can usefully contribute. They may not know about or be interested in this subject”

Which aspects of the project are likely to be of most interest to people? Who will be most interested (target the right groups). Have we asked if they want to be involved and explained how they can be?

“There's been an objection to involving people” (rules, conflict of interest etc)

Is it reasonable? What's the actual legal or procedural position? Can we work with others to overcome barriers?

“The project is too big / too small”

Can we break a big project into more manageable chunks? Can we just involve a small group for a small project?

“The project or the bigger picture has changed significantly”

Rethink the engagement plan and explain any change of direction to anyone who is already involved.

Timescales

- Involve people as early as possible, including the vision or scope
- Think about engagement when you write your project plan - it is much easier if you build it in (and identify a budget for any engagement costs) rather than trying to add it on later
- Try and involve people throughout the commissioning process. It may not be the same group of people - you might want different skills and interests, or people might not be able to commit to being involved for a long time
- Be clear with people from the beginning about timescales and discuss with them what's expected in terms of response times etc.
- The commissioning process is a cycle, so if people have not been involved from the beginning you can still involve them in a later stage

Build in more time for...

- Preparation – eg briefing people so they all have the same level of knowledge

- Meetings – eg having a pre-meeting to help people prepare for the main event
- Communication – eg using plain language, sending letters if people do not have email, making information available in alternative formats, more face to face contact
- Skills - eg building capacity, such as training for chairing meetings or interviewing
- Decision-making – eg accommodating more people with views and longer discussions to reach consensus and agreement
- Sign off – eg getting everyone’s ‘sign off’ before moving to the next stage

WHEN top tips

- Identify a suitable engagement timeframe – early enough and long enough, with time between stages
- Start by assuming there will be engagement - find reasons to involve people rather than excuses not to
- Prioritise engagement which will give the best value for money – a good balance between costs and benefits
- Recognise situations when it may be too late – when it would be a tick box exercise or to get out of a mistake or problem
- Invest time and effort at the planning stage
- Involve people as early as possible in the process, including the vision and scoping
- Don’t try to second-guess whether people will want to be involved or not: ask them whether/how/for how long
- Target - you don’t have to involve everybody all the time. Tailor what you ask people to do to their interests and skills - it can be easier to involve people who are directly affected by a change, as they have more of a stake

5. WHO to involve

Identifying people

There are different types of community (place, identity, interest, purpose). The law defines certain groups with [protected characteristics](#).

Individuals can speak for communities or themselves alone – or both. Organisations can be part of communities, or represent their members, or speak for themselves alone – or all three. Some will be ‘key stakeholders’ for a particular service or project and some of these will be ‘user led organisations’.

Deciding who you should involve from all the above should be based on:

- The characteristics of your particular commissioning project and service
- The potential value of people’s contributions – knowledge, experience, skills – plus the benefits of a ‘mix’
- Existing working relationships your service has with users (eg forums) and recommendations from people you already involve
- Up-front advice from one or two key stakeholder organisations and/or staff contacts
- The resources available for engagement

Potential pitfalls:

- Tokenism (eg 'one of everything' or engagement which is too late to influence decisions)
- Assuming that individuals can and do represent everyone else in their community – are they a 'representative' (with authority to speak for others) or a 'consultant' (giving their individual expertise or experience)?
- 'Consultation fatigue' among people from minority communities, who are asked too often
- Leaving out people who are currently under-represented among existing service users (it may be helpful to find out why this is the case)
- Potential conflicts of interest (for example an organisation which may later tender for a contract)

Equality and diversity

Some people find this one of the most challenging aspects of engagement in commissioning and worry about how to make the process as fair and inclusive as possible. Equality and diversity principles should be included in service commissioning frameworks and equality impact assessments can help to identify the specific service issues for a particular commissioning project.

This information will shape the engagement activities, in particular the **who** and **how**. Protected characteristic groups will be involved when their contribution is meaningful – not simply to tick a box.

Inviting people

- Identify and manage contact details, in line with data protection legislation and guidance. You may have your own contact data, but other sources may be available within an organisation, so ask around
- Invite everyone at the same time if possible. If you invite more people later, explain why
- Don't always expect people to come to you - you may need to go to them – for example, ask them to invite you to a meeting they are having
- Invitations should include the following as a minimum:
 - What they are being invited to do – the aim of the project and their possible time commitment eg meetings
 - Why they have been invited – their anticipated contribution / their (actual) ability to influence decisions
 - Who else is involved
 - Whether they will be paid expenses and/or a fee
 - Whether they have any access or other support needs to help them participate
 - Who they can contact if they have any questions
- Think about the tone, format and accessibility of the invitation and get advice if necessary. 'One size' may not fit all. The quality and tone of voice of an invitation can make or break engagement
- If you want some people to participate on a consultative basis (eg procurement or finance specialists), give them a specific invitation, brief and diary dates as soon as possible

Building skills and confidence to participate

For many of the people who get involved, it will be their first time. Keep this in mind and ask yourself 'how would this seem to me, if I didn't know anything about organisations and the way services are run'? Ask people what they need to help them to play a full part – for example:

- Background information – documents, who's who etc.
- Support – advice on public, mentoring, preparation for meetings etc.
- Training – sometimes active participants should be offered formal training

Good conduct

- Probity – be aware of the requirement to behave in line with what is expected of all staff
- Respect – must underpin all activities, be explicitly expected and action taken on any failure
- Confidentiality – must be clearly identified if it is an issue and action taken on any failure. People may need to sign a confidentiality agreement
- Conflicts of interest – for example involving an organisation which may go on to tender for a contract. Excluding them will reduce the benefit of their contribution at the earlier stages, but you can mitigate the risk of creating an unfair advantage by ensuring that all learning is shared in tender documents, for example. Ask for more advice if you need to
- Conflict – must be handled appropriately, with everyone understanding at the outset that compromise may be needed, how disagreements will be managed and what the boundaries are
- Commerce – be aware of intellectual property rights eg using other people's ideas as your own

WHO top tips

- Have a robust and consistent process for deciding who to involve – criteria will include knowledge, experience and skills
- Avoid tokenism – involving communities to tick boxes
- Think beyond the obvious – for example, if you need to find out why some groups are under-represented users of a service
- Beware 'consultation fatigue' (involving the same people too often) - get advice on the equality and diversity aspects of your engagement plans as early as possible
- If people are invited to join later in the process, explain why (for example, other people recommended them)
- Get clarity on whether individuals are speaking for themselves alone, on behalf of other people or organisations
- Be aware of potential conflicts of interest and how to manage them without losing the benefits of participation
- Think carefully about invitations – the quality and tone of voice can make or break engagement
- Be ready to build skills to enable people to contribute fully
- Be prepared for disagreements – that's part of the process. Involve staff with good people skills to help manage this. Ensure respect is maintained at all times

6. HOW to involve

Planning

High level planning – embed the principles of engagement, including co-production, into frameworks for commissioning, engagement, project/performance management etc. and in service plans. Understand who needs to know about specific projects eg an organisation's

programme and procurement teams. Think about the advice you may need from specialist colleagues - for example if there are health and safety issues around involving people in commissioning.

Specific plan for the project

- Understand the factors which will affect the commissioning and know how you will keep everyone informed as soon as possible if change will affect the project
- Be clear about who makes the final decisions and how you will aim to achieve a consensus and what will happen if it can't be reached
- Carry out research to identify good practice, case studies, learning from others
- Set out the objectives and actions for engagement throughout the project in the commissioning plan or an engagement annexe to it
- Identify a budget for engagement, including staff time and the cost of any venues, expenses claims, participation fees, survey analysis etc.
- Involve people in decisions about engagement! Have an early meeting with some key stakeholders or all your initial participants to discuss... who else should be invited, getting everyone up to speed at the start, timescales and key deadlines, frequency/date/time/venue of meetings, alternative formats and other support
- Be flexible to allow for change as more people get involved
- Commit to follow up – feed back, involve in a review etc.

Principles

Work hard to deliver a good engagement experience – news of bad ones soon spreads! There are many different words people use to describe what a good experience is like. These are the ones chosen by the team which co-produced this guide:

- Inclusive – many voices, real people, right time, equal, open, safe, shared, supported, valued
- Effective – communicated, interesting, enlightening, challenging, achieving, empowering, satisfying, fun, value for money, consensus

The evidence for these will come from the satisfaction of participants (ask them during and afterwards) and from the delivery of plans and outcomes.

These are the words you will hear if you get it wrong!...

Boring, bossy, fake, a 'done deal', waste of time

Methods

There are many ways to engage and it's important to use the right ones and a good mix to achieve the outcomes you want. Here are some of the main methods, and you can help decide which to use by thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of each for your particular circumstances.

- Community meetings
- Panels
- Questionnaires:
[Guidelines for Questionnaire Design - Market Research Society](#)
- Mystery shopping:

[Guidelines for Mystery Shopping Research - Market Research Society](#)

- Focus groups:

[Tips and Suggestions on Running Focus Groups and Test Panels – Department for Business, Innovation and Skills](#) (scroll down the alphabetical list – pdf file)

Try to offer a choice to people who want to get involved – some people will not want to travel, or sit in meetings. Think creatively to keep people interested.

Co-production

The term co-production is used to describe earlier, more continuous and more equal engagement, instead of the traditional model of consulting towards the end of a process. It has a role in shaping a vision and strategy, as well as needs assessment and identifying desired outcomes. It can significantly improve service design, procurement, delivery and evaluation and make a real difference for local people. It helps to build a consensus around difficult realities, such as declining resources and smaller budgets. It provides a dialogue which can assist the people (such as councillors) who make final decisions - they can take the views of the community and service users into account alongside considerations such as statutory duty and cost benefit.

The New Economics Foundation says:

“Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours.” Read more on the [nef website](#).

Co-production goes beyond traditional consultation and involvement and is an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services and communities. When co-production is a feature of commissioning, it will mean we...

- Co-assess
- Co-design
- Co-commission
- Co-deliver

The Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People has identified these characteristics of good co-production:

- Recognising people as assets
- Building on people's existing capabilities
- Mutuality and reciprocity
- Peer support networks
- Blurring distinctions
- Facilitating rather than delivering

Co-production feels different from the perspective of the citizen – working together as equal partners, valued, listened to and making a difference.

Payments, other support and incentives

The decision to provide financial and other support to people taking part should be based on:

- The commitment they are being invited to make – time, effort, expertise
- The need to ensure that the right people are able to take part
- The principle that no one should be left out-of-pocket by getting involved
- Decisions about these matters taken jointly by everyone involved

The types of support which could be offered include:

- Out-of-pocket expenses
- Involvement fee or other payment over and above expenses
- Personal supporter costs
- Translation support eg British Sign Language
- Meeting replacement care costs
- Alternative formats or equipment eg hearing loop
- Training

Incentives are less often used, but could include prize draws to encourage a higher survey response rate, or time credits.

The cost of using any of these must be included in your budget and for any expenditure other than out-of-pocket expenses you should say why this is necessary (for example because the people who need to be involved have caring responsibilities).

Everyone taking part needs to be given clear information about the support available and how and when any payments will be made. They must be given easy to use claim forms and made aware of the potential impact on any benefits they receive.

Using the results

Involving more people in commissioning, including co-production, is pointless unless they lead to defined outcomes such as better services. Local people and organisations will soon lose faith in participation if they don't see that their input is having a real effect on decision-making.

Final decisions will still usually be taken by councillors, service managers and contractors, but these will be informed by the involvement of more people - who need to know from the outset what decisions they can make themselves and what decisions will be taken elsewhere.

Feedback is vital during and after people are involved – what happened to their input, how was it used in decision-making, did it make a difference and if not, why not. Use the 'We asked, you said, we did' format. And give another 'thank you'!

HOW top tips

- Be clear with everyone early on about the factors which will influence the commissioning process and the constraints and risks imposed by change. Explain who will make final decisions - but don't use this as a 'get-out clause' or you will lose trust and credibility
- Make sure engagement really makes a difference - find out what others have done well
- It's cheaper and easier if you make it 'business as usual'
- Talk to colleagues before you start
- Plan, plan, plan – and get a budget

- Involve people from the start (including vision and scoping), at all stages and on their own terms – what, when, where and how – ask them
- Be clear about who can make final decisions
- Agree jointly and communicate the dates, times and venues as early as possible
- Send any papers early enough and in alternative formats on request
- Listen to the people who contribute, use their input and feed back on what changed as a result of people's involvement. Perhaps offer the opportunity to be part of a review process
- Thank people, often!
- Celebrate, share and learn from good experiences

7. Advice and guidance A-Z

[Community Development Foundation](#)

[The Consultation Institute](#)

['From passive customers to active co-producers'](#) (article on MyCustomer.com)

[Government guidance on consultation](#)

[The Market Research Society](#)

[National Co-production Network](#)

[National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts \(NESTA\)](#)

National Youth Agency guidance on involving young people in commissioning - click [here](#).

[New Economics Foundation](#)

[Partnerships Online](#) – A-Z of effective participation

[People and Participation](#)

[Think Local, Act Personal](#)

Appendix 1

What is commissioning?

It is when a public organisation aims to get the best outcomes (results) and value for money services for the local community by...

- Taking all available resources (not just their own) into account
- Helping to ensure that those resources are used in the most efficient, effective, fair and sustainable (enduring) way

It leads to the procurement (arranging or buying) of services by the local authority, partner organisations, communities or individuals who have a budget to buy the services or equipment they need.

There are four key stages of commissioning, often called:

- **Analyse** - understand, assess and define capacity and needs
- **Plan** - identify and shape the services to meet those needs
- **Do** - decide how to deliver the services (by the local authority or another organisation) and procure (buy) them if necessary
- **Review** - check whether the services are producing the outcomes and make changes if necessary

Strategic commissioning usually covers a whole service, but there can also be operational or local commissioning for parts of a service and individual or personalised commissioning for the services needed by a particular person and their family (sometimes called personal budgets). Joint or integrated commissioning is where two or more organisations work together. They may align (co-ordinate) their budgets or pool them to help the process.

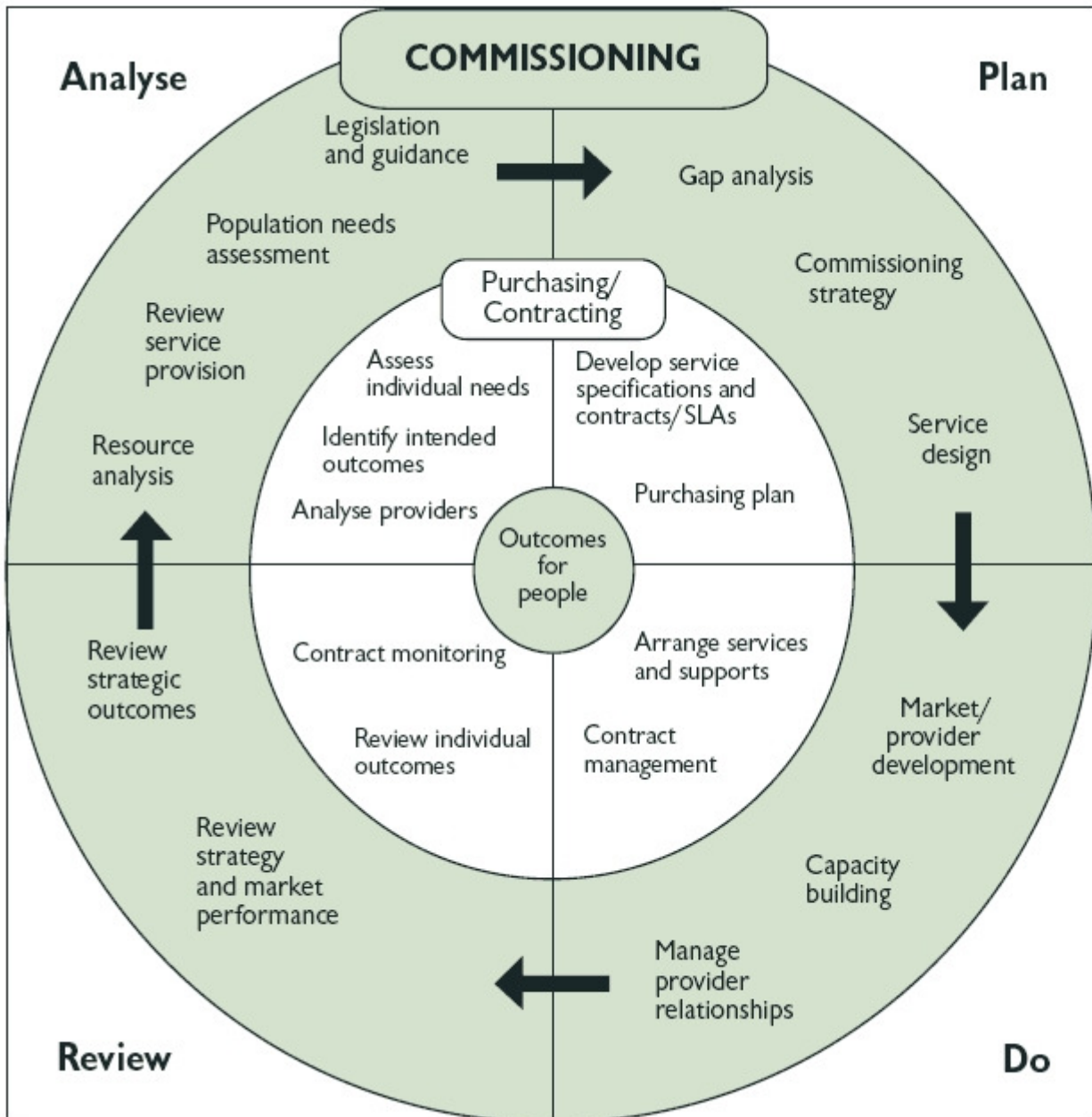
Good commissioning will usually include some or all of these approaches:

- Engaging with people who use services - from consultation to active participation in co-production
- Reviewing priorities, for example what share of resources should be targeted towards preventative work
- Identifying the most appropriate service provider, including community organisations and the private sector
- Pooling resources between organisations - buildings, staff and budgets

Co-production goes beyond traditional consultation and involvement and is an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services and communities. When co-production is a feature of commissioning, the four stages listed above are sometimes renamed:

- Co-assess
- Co-design
- Co-commission
- Co-deliver

The Commissioning Cycle:



Appendix 2

Key messages for people who get involved

Good communication is a vital ingredient of successful engagement in commissioning. Your first contact with everyone needs to be clear, concise and helpful, as well as making them want to get involved!

Key points you should cover:

- You are asking for their help
- What – the task and their capacity to influence decisions
- Why – the benefits of getting involved in commissioning

- Who – why them and who else is involved, the equality of relationships
- When – start and finish, frequency of involvement, times of day etc.
- How – what you will be asking them to do – specific tasks etc
- Decisions - what they are, who will make them and when
- Feeding back – how you will let them know the outcomes
- Further involvement – whether there is scope for further involvement eg at a future stage
- What to do if they not happy – during or after their involvement
- How you will ask them to feed back about their experience so you can learn from it
- Do they have any questions?
- Who to contact and when you need to hear from them by

An FAQ format is often a good way to get this information over.

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