

Improving strategic commissioning in the culture and sport sector

Developing Core Competencies

The following competencies were developed by Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust and support 'Understanding commissioning: a practical guide for the culture and sport sector'.

Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust

World class commissioning for leisure and culture

Context

The NHS has challenged Primary Care Trusts to become “World Class Commissioners”. A quality assurance framework has been developed which details 11 “core competencies” against which the PCTs have been assessed (February 2009).

Wigan Council has translated these “core competencies” into a framework which is suitable for use by its Local Strategic Partnership. Wigan Leisure & Culture Trust has customised them still further into a document which is relevant and meaningful to staff working within the Trust and the new Strategic Commissioner for Culture, Health & Wellbeing within the Council’s Single Commissioning Agency.

Although World Class Commissioning has not yet been adopted by the local authority sector, an analysis of the “core competencies” should be helpful to our sector in understanding what is meant by commissioning, and how we can best respond to it.

This paper should be read in conjunction with the IDeA Guidance Papers on strategic commissioning in the culture and sport sector. In particular, the 11 competencies can be aligned to the commissioning model set out in Figure 1 of Guidance Paper 2 “Options Appraisal, the Business Case, and Procurement”.

We hope that this paper will add to the fund of knowledge which is now accumulating in our sector, and will help colleagues working within the sector to translate commissioning concepts into practical examples of what needs to be done in order to become “world class”.

Rodney Hill
Chief Executive

**THE 11 “CORE COMPETENCIES” OF WORLD CLASS COMMISSIONING,
TRANSLATED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE LEISURE AND CULTURAL SECTOR**

- 1 Local Leader of Leisure and Culture**
- 2 Work with partners to achieve key outcomes**
- 3 Engage with citizens and the users of services**
- 4 Collaborate with providers**
- 5 Manage knowledge and assess needs**
- 6 Prioritise investment**
- 7 Stimulate the market**
- 8 Promote improvement and innovation**
- 9 Secure good procurement skills**
- 10 Ensure contract compliance**
- 11 Make sound financial investments and ensure value for money**

1 Local Leader of Leisure & Culture

- Provide strategic leadership for the development and improvement of leisure and culture in the local area, (e.g. establish partnerships such as the Cultural Partnership; champion leisure and culture issues across partners).
- Take the lead in establishing leisure and culture priorities for the local area across all partners (e.g. produce an integrated leisure and cultural strategy and/or Strategic Commissioning Plan).
- Use advocacy and influencing skills to ensure that leisure and culture's contribution is articulated and recognised (e.g. within the Local Authority; Local Area Agreement; Local Strategic Partnership; in local communities).
- Be seen as the primary source for credible, timely and authoritative advice on leisure and cultural matters (e.g. first point of contact for media enquiries and strategic consultation issues).
- Be skilled in a variety of public, community and customer engagement and involvement methods which embrace all groups of people, especially hard to reach groups (e.g. providing leadership and co-ordination to the assessment of leisure and cultural need in super output areas).
- Be recognised for well developed skills and abilities, impartiality, high reputation, and supportive approach amongst stakeholders, partners and local communities.
- Be recognised as influencing and shaping the decisions and actions of partners and stakeholders (e.g. development of leisure and cultural facilities in a new school).
- Be recognised as a leisure and culture employer of choice (e.g. provides effective employee development and training and possesses well-motivated, quality staff).
- Give leadership to skill development, best practice dissemination, research and analysis in the local leisure and culture sector (e.g. seminars, workshops, training programmes).

2 Work effectively with partners to achieve key outcomes

- Proactively encourage partnerships with appropriate agencies, locally and regionally (e.g. across Council departments – Children's & Young People's Services; Environmental Services), with the voluntary and community sector (e.g. sports clubs, drama groups, family history groups), with leisure and culture providers (e.g. theatres, schools, FE/HE sector, heritage groups), private sector (e.g. professional sports clubs, health and fitness providers), other public sector bodies (e.g. PCT, Police, Probation) and regional cultural agencies (e.g. Sport England, Arts Council England, English Heritage, Natural England, Museums, Libraries & Archives).

- Ensure that partnerships are built with the Local Strategic Partnership and thematic groups (e.g. Cultural Partnership) and that leisure and culture needs and aspirations are reflected in Local Area Agreement priorities and targets (e.g. increased physical activity).
- Collaborate with other commissioning agencies to drive strategic planning and service design (e.g. Children & Young People's Services, PCT, Adult Services/Health & Wellbeing).
- Develop joint commissioning plans with other partners that build upon the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and develop other forms of collaboration (e.g. PCT, Community Safety Partnership, LSP).
- Share monitoring arrangements, consider pooled budgets and jointly-funded posts (e.g. with PCT).
- Share knowledge and information, especially in respect of local community intelligence and engagement (e.g. citizens' panels, community profiles, place surveys, utilising IDeA Customer Insight methodology).
- Develop co-commissioning/inclusive commissioning/strategic partnering frameworks between commissioners and providers to maximise insights, knowledge and achievement of key outcomes (e.g. with local Leisure Trust, Groundwork Trust, ALMO's, Health Promotion Teams).
- Encourage partners to share a joint ambition for improvement and innovation (e.g. tackling health inequalities, service redesign, development of new facilities).

3 Engage with citizens and the users of services

- Develop a clear understanding of the ways of achieving effective community engagement (e.g. work closely with the specialist teams within the Council and the PCT).
- Participate in borough-wide surveys to gauge public opinion on issues which will influence commissioning decisions (e.g. Citizens' Panel; place surveys).
- Invite comments from users on their experiences, on how the service can be improved, and ensure that there is feedback on how decisions have been influenced (e.g. "you said, we did" sheets on leisure centre notice boards).
- Communicate the vision and key local priorities to the public (e.g. via the local press, and by attending local arts/sport/heritage group meetings).
- Develop positive relationships with the local media and respond in a timely manner to any enquiries (e.g. invite the local media to attend events, and seek their support in determining local views on investment options).
- Ensure that relevant staff members have received training in both presentation skills and media handling.

- Work with key partners, particularly in the third sector, to ensure that there is effective engagement with minority and hard-to-reach groups, in order to raise aspirations and to address local inequalities in access to services (e.g. to identify barriers for ethnic minority groups in accessing physical activities, or making libraries more user-friendly to teenagers).

4 Collaborate with providers

- Engage in regular and active dialogue with provider partners, share data as appropriate, and turn information into intelligence and action which will improve leisure and cultural services for the community.
- Ensure that, in the development of future strategies, there is meaningful engagement with provider partners (e.g. an existing Leisure & Culture Trust, private sector operator, or other existing third sector organisations such as the local sports or arts council).
- Utilise the existing knowledge of providers (who work very closely with local people and understand individual needs) in formulating commissioning decisions (e.g. the local Leisure & Culture Trust).
- Utilise any existing provider evidence-base in the identification of needs, particularly at a district or super-output area level (e.g. usage data from leisure centre operators).
- Where a number of different providers exist, try to build networks (across provider boundaries) to facilitate multi-disciplinary input into service design (e.g. joint service centres; new schools; obesity strategy).
- Share information with commissioning colleagues at county or regional level to develop standards and share best practice which will help hold provider partners to account and thereby encourage innovation and continuous quality improvement (e.g. via Chief Leisure Officers' Groups).

5 Manage knowledge and assess needs

Needs assessment is the foundation of the commissioning process, and the “core competencies” set out below should be read in conjunction with the IDeA “Guidance Paper 1 – Needs Assessment” which sets out the process in much more detail under six headings:-

National and Local Strategic Context
 Quantitative Analysis
 Qualitative Analysis
 Analysis of Existing Provision
 Gap Analysis
 Priority Setting

The “core competencies” of World Class Commissioning draw particular attention to the following key leisure and culture components of a needs assessment:-

- Review demographic trends (e.g. population numbers, births, age profile, ethnicity, disability, immigration).
- Analyse socio-economic data (e.g. JSNA data on deprivation, living arrangements, employment/worklessness, incomes, transport, rural/urban).
- Assemble education, health, housing and other relevant information (e.g. JSNA data including healthy lifestyles, volunteering, adult community learning).
- Assemble leisure and culture information (e.g. Active People Survey, Taking Part Survey, satisfaction levels, national and local indicators, benchmarks).
- Investigate demand trends for leisure and cultural services (e.g. falling library use, increased demand for health and fitness, demand for informal outdoor activity such as walking or cycling).
- Carry out assessment of needs and aspirations by neighbourhood/locality/super output area (e.g. JSNA; township community profiles; Local Area Agreement data; service user/non-user feedback).
- Identify obstacles to achieving desired outcomes (e.g. resources/funding, data gaps, lack of facilities).
- Consider implications for commissioning (e.g. reassess priorities, commission new services to fill gaps, redistribute resources to meet unmet needs).

6 Prioritise investment

The effective prioritisation of investment decisions will depend upon carrying out a robust options appraisal process and making a sound business case. The IDeA “Guidance Paper 2 – Options Appraisal, the Business Case and Procurement” explains these processes in detail and customises them for the needs of the leisure and cultural sector.

The “core competencies” of World Class Commissioning draw particular attention to the following components which are entirely compatible with the IDeA paper:-

- Ensure that an Options Appraisal is undertaken to identify and evaluate all the possible ways of meeting the identified needs and outcomes [ref. the 10 key steps of an Options Appraisal in Guidance Paper 2].
- Utilise predictive modelling and demand tools, JSNA data, usage/activity data, public surveys, impact analysis, risk assessment to underpin investment decisions (e.g. Sport England ‘Towards a Level Playing Field’ – a guide to the production of playing pitch strategies; gaps in meeting National Library Standards).
- Create a strategic investment plan that captures the investment strategies of all potential partners in leisure and cultural provision (e.g. private sector leisure developments, professional sports clubs, community sports clubs, new schools/FE/HE institutions).

- Prioritise investment decisions to fill identified gaps, provide value for money, deliver on agreed outcomes, avoid duplication and promote innovative service design and delivery (e.g. shared use facilities, joint service centres).
- Identify clear responsibilities for funding investment plans between partners and funders, especially ongoing revenue funding (e.g. required partner contributions to sustainably fund the running of a new theatre).
- Articulate and deliver disinvestment priorities to fund new developments (e.g. the closure of libraries, sports facilities, land and building disposals)
- Review and update investment plans between partners on a regular basis to take account of changing priorities/circumstances (e.g. economic downturn and financial recession, reduced levels of grant, changed national/regional priorities).

7 Stimulate the market

One of the key underlying principles of commissioning is to stimulate the market and create a number of providers, in order to widen choice and develop competition. Currently, across the leisure and cultural sector, the main providers have different degrees of representation. The philosophy of commissioning is not necessarily to create a hard commissioner/provider split but rather to work in a co-ordinated way to utilise strengths and knowledge from all available sources, including potential providers.

This section should be read in conjunction with IDeA “Guidance Paper 3 – Building Capacity in the Third Sector” which sets out the “Eight Principles of Good Commissioning” which were developed by the Office of the Third Sector.

The “core competencies” of World Class Commissioning draw particular attention to the following key components of market stimulation:-

- Prepare a clearly defined commissioning strategy which is based on a sound understanding of community needs, aspirations and priorities, as a precursor to market stimulation.
- Consider, as a key policy issue, the extent to which the commissioners (and partners in the LSP) wish to use their influence and power to re-shape the provider market and thereby widen local choice (e.g. by encouraging more provision via the third sector).
- Be aware of the local provider network and its ability to provide successfully against the service specifications which have been drawn up (e.g. social enterprises which could manage facilities).
- Consider the timescales for contracts in the light of any necessary investment requirements, to allow potential providers to align their own investment and planning processes with the commissioner’s requirements (e.g. a grounds maintenance service will require investment in plant and equipment).

- Where appropriate, stimulate provider development to meet identified user and community needs (e.g. using over-60's to lead physical activity sessions at a local level for older people).
- Establish clear procedures to enable the performance of providers to be monitored and quality assured, and rewarded or penalised, as appropriate, for high/poor performance (e.g. linked to the achievement of LAA outcomes).
- Specify realistic timescales for providers to deliver innovation and change, giving support, as appropriate, through a partnership approach to delivering improved services (e.g. changing static provision to peripatetic provision over an agreed timescale).

8 Promote improvement and innovation

- Benchmark key services against similar provision elsewhere (e.g. use National Benchmarking Service or APSE benchmarking models).
- Conduct a self-assessment, utilising the Culture & Sport Improvement Toolkit or other recognised self assessment framework.
- Utilise one or more of the quality assurance frameworks for facilities to help measure performance against best practice (e.g. QUEST; Green Flag; Museums Accreditation).
- Join local networks which encourage the sharing of good practice and promote continuous improvement (e.g. regional or county cultural improvement networks).
- Interrogate and utilise data from surveys (e.g. Active People) to drill down into the needs of local areas, or socio-economic groups, and re-focus service developments appropriately.
- Set stretch targets and challenges to improve efficiency, encourage innovative ways of achieving them, and monitor performance on a regular basis (e.g. increase library usage by widening the range of services offered).
- Work with, and understand the potential of, community and third sector providers to contribute to the raising of standards (e.g. increase number of coaches through local sports clubs).
- Create incentives to drive innovation and quality (e.g. a Leisure and Culture Trust could be incentivised to stretch performance on key outcome measures which contribute to LAA targets).
- Ensure mechanisms are in place to engage with users and other stakeholders in driving service reconfiguration and improvement (e.g. engage with Township Forums, and seek views on the service via public surveys).

9 Secure good procurement skills

- Develop a clear understanding of relevant Government policies, competition principles and laws (e.g. EU procurement legislation).

- Ensure there is a clear understanding of the overarching political principles which drive the policy of both the Council and the LSP (e.g. PCTs have adopted different approaches to the rigidity of the commissioner/provider split).
- Evaluate existing services and determine which are the highest priority for market-testing (e.g. the services with the largest budget, or those which are weakest against benchmarking data).
- Consult widely, and share information, to assist the process of preparing clear and accurate service specifications (e.g. information sharing within Chief Leisure Officers' Groups).
- Utilise existing strengths and knowledge from all available sources to ensure that service specifications are fit for purpose and meet the needs of the area (e.g. a recent Public Administration Select Committee report stated: *"Commissioners need external input when designing service specifications, and this is recognised in EU Procurement Rules."*).
- Design contracts which are fair and enforceable (by obtaining appropriate legal advice) and incorporate agreed performance measures (e.g. which contribute to LAA outcomes for leisure and cultural services) with intervention protocols if they are not met.
- Ensure contracts cover a reasonable time period, both to justify investment in equipment, (e.g. grounds maintenance), recruitment and training, or to enable an in-house Leisure & Culture Trust to bid for contracts in other areas with some assurance of longevity.
- Develop strong project management skills within the senior management structure of the commissioning department.

10 Ensure contract compliance

- Work in partnership (rather than in an adversarial fashion) with providers to ensure contract compliance, and the delivery of the highest possible quality of service and value for money (e.g. a leisure "provider" will undertake a large degree of community engagement, which can be of great value to the commissioner).
- Work closely with providers to sustain and improve services, engage in constructive performance discussions, and deliver together continuous improvement (e.g. undertake Single Improvement Tool assessment on a joint basis).
- Ensure that there is a clear understanding about who collects which data on finance, performance, etc., in order to avoid duplication, and that it is shared at pre-arranged performance discussions.
- Use the performance evaluation findings to engage in constructive performance conversations, ideally by working to resolve issues or, ultimately, using agreed dispute procedures.

- Utilise benchmarking data to compare performance between providers within the same borough, and with providers elsewhere (e.g. National Benchmarking Service or APSE performance data).

11 Make sound financial investments and ensure value for money

- Ensure that commissioning decisions are sustainable and provide sound investments to secure desired outcomes (e.g. the commissioning of a new leisure and culture provider is based on thorough evaluation, and satisfaction with their track record and capabilities).
- Employ staff with excellent financial and resource management skills to ensure that commissioning decisions are affordable and are set within overall risk and assurance frameworks (e.g. including financial planning and forecasting, business case modelling, impact and risk assessment, programme budgeting and financial governance).
- Prepare robust annual, medium and longer-term financial plans that deliver agreed outcomes, complement strategic plans, track any variation in performance against plans, and take remedial action (e.g. customer income variations or energy price fluctuations).
- Ensure that the annual budgeting process identifies and takes account of trends, key risks, and potential high impact changes in cost and activity levels (e.g. rising unemployment; new legislation).
- Provide access for commissioning staff to relevant and timely financial activity, v.f.m. and performance data which enables them to commission effectively.
- Determine appropriate leisure and culture quality standards for providers to evidence (e.g. QUEST, Green Flag, Museum Accreditation, Charter Mark) and monitor their performance on a regular basis.
- Develop performance measuring skills which will assist in focusing on outcomes and impacts (e.g. demonstrating how leisure and culture can contribute to achieving LAA outcomes).