

Commissioning

Commissioning in Ireland: Exploring the Landscape for Child and Family Services. A Literature Review

KEY FINDINGS

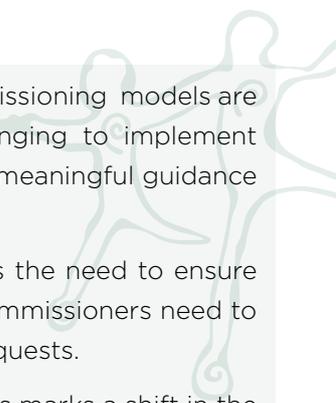


By Dr Aileen Shaw and Dr John Canavan | DECEMBER 2016

Key Messages from the Literature

In 2014, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, published the first nationally developed commissioning strategy for child and family services in the Republic of Ireland. The strategy defines commissioning as ‘the process of deciding how to use the total resources available for children and families in order to improve outcomes in the most efficient, equitable, proportionate and sustainable way’ (Gillen et al., 2013: 1). Internationally, the term ‘commissioning’ is not widely used in North American and European contexts; rather, it is assumed under a broader agenda of contracting and externalization of service provision (Rees, 2013). It forms a major part of public service reform efforts to ensure better value for services and includes performance measurement and demonstration of impact as core principles for allocating resources. This review of the literature on commissioning provides an overview of practices in other jurisdictions, primarily the United Kingdom, to draw on lessons that highlight both the opportunities and challenges encountered.

In examining the experiences of stakeholders in adopting a commissioning approach to the delivery of services, a lack of clarity and definition prevails in both the theory and the practice of commissioning. Despite a wealth of information on the rationale, the processes involved and the operation of commissioning practices, the dearth of research on its impact in delivering better outcomes or improving services is noteworthy. At the same time, particularly given the emphasis given to the financial elements, questions arise as to the extent to which commissioning frameworks represent a genuinely new way of working, or whether they form part of a broader context geared towards a more conscious adoption of the need for changes in the way public services are planned, managed and delivered. Overall, it appears that reform is inevitable and a commissioning agenda forms part of an environment where, in Ireland, as in other jurisdictions, the call for greater accountability in terms of evidence of effectiveness and outcomes for services provided is part of the contemporary culture. It is hoped that awareness of both the opportunities and the shortfalls of commissioning identified in the literature will provide an opportunity for agencies in Ireland to learn from and put in place mechanisms with which to inform and orient their commissioning strategy. In this regard, the following learning is critical:

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- The adherence to generalised notions of efficiency and outcomes upon which commissioning models are often founded, while eminently valuable at a high level, become extremely challenging to implement in practice. Moving beyond this requires that greater attention be given to providing meaningful guidance to stakeholders at the outset of the commissioning process.
 - Related to this, implicit in many commissioning models are mixed messages such as the need to ensure value for money alongside that of producing the best outcomes for service users. Commissioners need to be aware of the difficulties posed by such contradictory goals in assessing funding requests.
 - While broadly welcome, the transition to outcome-based, more formalised agreements marks a shift in the nature of the relationship between the state and the community and voluntary sector. It requires significant investment not only in the technical skills and capacity building required to execute the commissioning process in all its stages, but also in ensuring the opportunity for ongoing dialogue on the challenges and risks associated with the model.
 - The potential for collaboration afforded by the commissioning process exists, and in principle forms the basis of a positive engagement in which the community and voluntary sector is involved in the design and direction of public services. It is critical that commissioning be understood not as a paper-driven, isolated exercise, but rather, as a continual process of monitoring, evaluation and improvement involving interaction between all stakeholders.
 - At the same time, the role of information should not be underestimated. In several respects, commissioning is a data-driven exercise; it calls for investment by both commissioners and funded organisations in their internal capacity to produce, analyse and utilise information.
 - The use of outcomes as the basis for assessment and decision-making, while valued as a means of moving organisations from activity to results-oriented thinking, requires commissioners to devote greater attention to defining and setting standards for the measurement of outcomes that can be applied across the spectrum.
 - Finally, in a performance-driven environment, there is a need to ensure that the dynamics of a client-contractor relationship and the formalities of contractual arrangements do not diminish the principle of partnership working between the statutory and voluntary sector.

This literature is derived from the Commissioning work package as part of the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership & Family Support.

Full literature review is available online at: www.nuigalway.ie/cfrc/mainstream/ourworktoday

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