



Commissioning case study

Commissioning for outcomes and measuring social impact in Sutton

The headlines

- Sutton Council has embedded a council-wide approach to commissioning for outcomes and to measuring social impact.
- Among other benefits, the changes have allowed Sutton to develop a range of services for children and young people that, despite reduced funding, offer increasingly bespoke services to those most in need and which build on the assets already in their community.
- The programme has been underpinned by a comprehensive training programme that not only provided 120 council officers and 30 voluntary sector colleagues with skills and knowledge but also gave them permission to think differently about commissioning.
- Sutton Council was a participant in wave 2 of the Commissioning Academy.

“... It was great working with the developmental assets working group at Sutton Council to put together the developmental assets approach. Our role was to identify community developmental assets, drawing on the ‘One Planet Living’ framework for sustainable living used by the council. As part of this work we tested a first version with a local neighbourhood planning group and then made further refinements. Now we’re using the assets to engage with local people, stakeholders and funders, and to build the case for a number of local sustainability projects including a local community energy project, a schools sustainability project, and an ecology park ...”

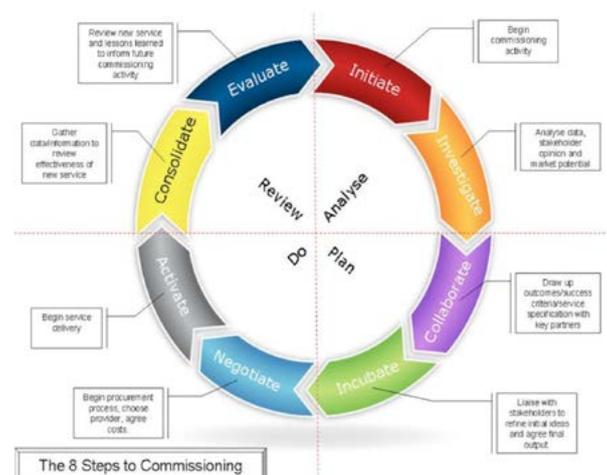
Conor Moloney, Head of Regions & Communities, Bioregional

What is the context?

Sutton took the decision to move towards a council-wide, strategic approach to commissioning in 2011, with the aims of:

- achieving better outcomes for residents;
- reducing costs to the authority;
- developing partnership working between the council, residents and partners from other sectors; and
- taking an increasingly entrepreneurial approach so as to deliver creative solutions faster with fewer resources

Over the following 18 months the council made steady progress towards implementing a new framework for commissioning, which it felt was beginning to deliver tangible improved outcomes for residents and to contribute towards the council’s overall financial savings targets. Changes were made to the organisational structure with the creation of three commissioning directorates and the establishment of a new research and intelligence service. Improvements were also made to the council’s approach to business planning and performance management, combined with a process of learning and development across the council to make sure members and officers understood the implications of the new approaches and had the specific skills to deliver them. A council-wide commissioning framework, based on an ‘8 steps to commissioning’ model, and a toolkit were developed for use by commissioners throughout the organisation.



Nevertheless, the council identified that there was still more to be done in terms of achieving a consistent focus on outcomes, measuring social impact and engaging residents and citizens more directly in commissioning.

What commissioning and delivery model has been adopted?

In 2013 the council therefore adopted an outcomes-based accountability model, linked with a new 'developmental assets' approach to assessing and measuring the social impact of commissioned services, both internally and externally provided.

Outcomes-based accountability is a methodology that allows for setting outcomes that can be linked to organisational priorities and then measured for impact; it goes beyond simply measuring outputs. In Sutton use of the methodology focuses on setting outcomes with both internal and external providers, linking those outcomes to council priorities and then co-producing a way to measure those outcomes robustly but proportionately. All commissioners are being trained in the methodology and all new specifications are increasingly outcomes-focused. The council has also trained providers from the local voluntary sector in the approach in order to develop the local market.

Having already amended its procurement procedures to take account of the requirements of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, the council wanted to ensure that this approach was a strong feature of the whole commissioning cycle. Following consultation with the Sutton voluntary sector, it decided to adopt a method of measuring social impact known as 'developmental assets'. Initially developed by the Search Institute in order to improve outcomes for young people, and based on the question 'What do young people need to succeed?', the methodology assumes that everyone has some inherent assets, but that people are more likely to lead positive lives if the number of assets they possess is increased. In commissioning terms, this means commissioning only those services or interventions which evidence proves to have a positive impact on things that demonstrably improve people's lives.

As the developmental assets methodology applies to individuals, Sutton also carried out work on assets at a community level, based on the question 'What do sustainable communities need to take part and take pride?' Commissioners were trained in the approach and required to link either individual-level thematic areas or community-level thematic areas to outcomes in their specifications and contracts. Two pilots were set up to test the wider applicability of the outcomes-based accountability and developmental assets approaches, focusing on looked-after children placements and ecology services.

As a voluntary sector provider, we had a fragmenting funding base, with each different funder requiring different outcomes data and using different impact measurement tools. This reporting kaleidoscope absorbed significant amounts of time and energy, not only for staff, but service users too. We had to change and went on the hunt for one way of capturing meaningful data, that first and foremost demonstrated that we really were making a difference and secondly provided a tool that could talk to all funders' monitoring and evaluation requirements. That's when we came across 'Developmental Assets'. Since then we've gone from strength to strength, securing long-term funding with our local authority and being recognised nationally with the Queens Award for Voluntary Service. Our service users and volunteers are happier and more involved in taking ownership for their outcomes too, as the developmental assets language is easy to digest and helps make soft outcomes easier to measure.

Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Centre Sutton

Who are the key partners?

Organisations from the local voluntary sector Compact group were key partners, the principal ones being:

- the Volunteer Centre Sutton;
- Sutton Centre for the Voluntary Sector; and
- BioRegional

In addition, Shopmobility Sutton, Age UK Sutton and the Riverside Community Association helped to test the approach.

What has been the impact?

The roll-out is relatively recent and therefore a full evaluation has not yet taken place. However, Sutton claims that using this approach to commissioning has helped to facilitate:

- a local trust to take over two theatres in the borough that may otherwise have been closed;
- local organisations to compete with larger bodies on a more even footing. A recent example is an organisation that predominantly uses volunteers being able to demonstrate added value in a bid – delivering books to people as well as hot dinners – which helped it to win a contract for meals on wheels;
- a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the regeneration of a local park where local people are co-commissioning with the council. The council will receive £3 million based on local priorities for the park and a group of residents has set up a steering group to oversee the delivery phase of the project;
- a range of services for children and young people that, despite reduced funding, offer increasingly bespoke services to those most in need and which build on the assets already in their community, particularly voluntary mentors;

- through the production of infographics and other information, a greater understanding of how small community organisations build assets in the community, even when they are not directly commissioned by the council to do so; and
- the development of **sustainability audit** in a local area

What have been the key elements of success?

Leadership and active support from the chief executive has been critical. In addition, the lead member for resources has actively championed the council's approach to commissioning as well as, crucially, providing constructive challenge to officers.

The council delivered a comprehensive training programme that covered roughly 120 council officers and 30 voluntary sector colleagues. Not only did this programme provide people with skills and knowledge but, importantly, it gave them permission to think differently about commissioning.

The participation of voluntary sector groups was key and far greater than the council expected. Many tested the concepts in practice with local people whose engagement is also seen as an essential element of success. The Young Commissioners, for example, are a diverse group of young people who have been trained in the Sutton approach to commissioning and actively participate in the commissioning of services for young people. Some examples of where young people have made meaningful contributions to the commissioning cycle include running user and stakeholder focus groups, procuring providers and helping draft service specifications.

Sutton feels that participating in the Commissioning Academy has been valuable too.

“ Through participating in the Commissioning Academy, we have been able to share ideas in a safe place and genuinely appreciate the ‘critical friends’ we have met along the way. ”

What have we learnt?

Sutton is clear that this approach only works with genuine collaboration. Its approach to engaging with other local authorities, the wider public sector, residents and service users and the voluntary and community sector was particularly remarked on by participants in a Commissioning Academy site visit in 2014. However, while Sutton is committed to engaging with residents and service users at the early stages of any commissioning process, it recognises that there is still more to be done in the field of co-production during the commissioning cycle with residents.

“ We were very clear with all stakeholders that the council wants to see social value at the heart of the commissioning decisions it takes but equally clear that we did not have the answer and so we needed help. ”

Changing the organisational culture has presented a challenge, with staff needing more support than was perhaps anticipated to implement new ways of working and to change long-standing behaviours.

“ People need to feel they have permission to try something new, particularly if they are worried about losing their jobs. Do not underestimate this and the time required to demonstrate it is OK to take a risk. It would be untrue to claim that everything we do is now outcomes-focused and linked to assets, but we are getting there. ”

Being able to articulate clearly expectations around the change is also important.

“ The main obstacle was simply explaining the concept. We were fortunate that our children’s commissioning team had been using outcomes-based accountability techniques for a while and that one local provider was an expert in the developmental assets approach. Fusing the two together took a lot of thinking through and a small number of us are now able to describe it relatively simply. We need to get better at that. ”

Who can I contact?

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Other useful information

Strategic commissioning page at <https://www.sutton.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=14831>

Sustainability toolkit at www.suttonsst.org