

Commissioning issues for AHPs and tips on engaging commissioners

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Heather Wicks, head of commissioning and service redesign at Oxford City Primary Care Trust and professional adviser in orthoptics to the Department of Health, spells out the key messages that commissioning holds for AHPs.

"The focus on providing care outside hospital in 'Our health, our care, our say: a new direction for community services' provides AHPs with many opportunities to show commissioners how they can add value to the patients' experience and outcomes, and the modernisation agenda.

First, however, AHPs need to consider whether their role is one of a provider or commissioner. While AHPs may feel that they most naturally fit with the provider services, they need to consider that commissioners require clear, objective and strategically informed clinical perspectives that cannot be supplied by providers if they are negotiating a contract. Once AHPs have decided how they will provide input to commissioners, it is important they understand the most appropriate way of approaching commissioners.

How can AHPs help commissioners deliver their objectives?

Commissioners' objectives will always focus on delivery of the national and local modernisation agenda. To find out specific service redesign and delivery plans, research your local delivery plans (LDP) and Integrated Service Improvement Plans (ISIP). Explore the financial context within your area both in relation to PCT and practice-based commissioners. Consider also talking to your PCT professional executive committee and strategic health authority AHP representatives to find out the priorities and the best time to open a dialogue with commissioners.

Objectives commissioners will wish to achieve:

- improving access to services by delivering services outside a hospital, setting out where it is safe and appropriate to do so, thus also freeing up hospital care for those who can only be managed in this setting
- supporting people with long-term conditions enabling them to be managed within a community setting
- Improving the patient/user experience by avoiding a fragmented, disjointed approach to care by first considering what needs to be delivered and then how, where and by which healthcare professionals
- improving the population's health by preventing disease occurrence or progression by working at the public health end of the patient pathway.

Demonstrating to commissioners the value and role of AHPs requires an ability to think and present ideas strategically and objectively.

Present both the costs (financial and opportunity) and benefits (for all stakeholders) of any proposed initiative, as commissioners will usually only pursue ideas which offer value for money. Think innovatively, avoid requesting more of what you already have and consider working differently to achieve objectives. Talking commissioners' 'language' will help influence a positive outcome for patients and healthcare professionals."

To read Heather's guidance in full, e-mail heather.wicks@oxfordcity-pct.nhs.uk