

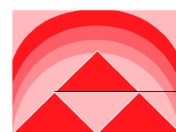


**NEWHAM CAPACITY BUILDERS  
WORKING GROUP**

# **HOW WAS COMMISSIONING FOR YOU?**

**Report of research on behalf of the Newham  
Capacity Builders Working Group on  
voluntary, community and faith sector attitudes to  
Newham council's commissioning process from  
2006-2008**

**March 2008**



**Aston-Mansfield**

*Generating community wealth for social change*

**Community Involvement Unit**

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# **How Was Commissioning For You?**

## **Voluntary, community and faith sector attitudes to Newham council's commissioning process 2006-2008**

In January 2008, Aston-Mansfield Community Involvement Unit (CIU) agreed to carry out a limited survey, on behalf of Newham ChangeUp's Capacity Builders Working Group, that asked voluntary, community and faith sector groups about their experiences of the London Borough of Newham's "Grants-to-Commissioning" exercise.

### **The Capacity Builders Working Group**

This is a sub-group of the Newham ChangeUp Partnership, a body that brings together local infrastructure organisations in the borough and representatives of Newham council to coordinate quality, sustainable support for voluntary, community and faith organisations. The Working Group includes staff involved in the frontline delivery of capacity-building in Newham and aims to coordinate different organisation's support provision, avoid duplication and to develop collaborative projects, including the setting up of a set of jointly agreed standards for the way that capacity-building is delivered.

This research emerged from the Working Group's discussions about issues on the commissioning process raised by a number of the groups that members work with. Members felt that it would be helpful to have a broader understanding of views on the information and support that was available, on the preparation of bids and on the development of consortia. This is a limited, unfunded study and therefore resourced from the CIU's existing capacity, so we were pleased that 13 local organisations completed our questionnaire [appendix 1] and their responses are included in this report. Nine of these groups were funded voluntary organisations, three were unfunded community groups and one faith group (which also provides community activities) also contributed its views. Of these groups, four were involved in individual bids only, two in consortium bids only and five decided not to submit a bid. Two organisations were part of both individual and consortium bids.

We are very grateful to those who took the time to participate and believe that their views can play an important part in improving the way the commissioning is undertaken in the future. We would recommend that the commitment by the London Borough of Newham to a review of the commissioning process is not restricted to council staff but seeks the widest range of views of voluntary, community and faith organisations.

### **The Commissioning Process from 2006 to 2008**

#### **Consultation on commissioning – October 2006 to January 2007**

An event was held 17 October 2006 at West Ham Football Club to launch consultation on the grants-to-commissioning process. The intention was to commission most, but not all, of the existing grant-aid from the local authority. The consultation paper presented at the event included a timetable that indicated a deadline for comments on pre-qualification criteria of 31 October and that from 7 November 2006, 'expression of interest' forms would be made available that would need to be returned by 15 December.

Further consultation events were planned from mid- November to mid December 2006, but dialogue with the voluntary, community and faith sectors persuaded the council that running consultation in tandem with the tendering process was unfeasible. The bidding process was halted and the council decided to delay the start of commissioned service delivery from April 2007 to April 2008. A letter was sent by David Murray, then Head of Community, on 22 January 2007 explaining this to groups in receipt of grant funding.

### **The launch of the commissioning process to the preparation of tenders – September 2007 to December 2007**

On 27 September 2007, the council relaunched the commissioning process at West Ham Town Hall in Stratford, with an information pack and feedback from the previous year's consultation entitled *Grants to Commissioning Consultation – Outcomes*. The latter indicated that on the basis of the consultation with voluntary, community and faith sector groups, the local authority had agreed on commissioning to replace the main grants programmes in Culture & Community and NewCEYS, with service specifications *"that utilised evidence and understanding of community needs drawn from sources within and outside of the Council."* There would be a single-stage bidding process without the requirement of initial expressions of interest. The consultation feedback indicated that there would not be an application form but that potential service providers would be invited to submit bids in their own format. There was a commitment that the council would fund a programme of training/support workshops and that it welcomed consortium or partnership bids.

Unfortunately, the information pack presented in at the event at the end of September did not include service specifications or indicative total budgets. These were unavailable, as they had not been finalised, so the deadline for receipt of tenders could only be given as six weeks from their eventual publication.

A number of members of the Capacity Builders Working Group had already had a meeting on 18 September 2007 with the consultant brought in to lead on commissioning and had asked a series of detailed questions on information needed to provide support to local groups. This included more detail on how bids and eligibility criteria would be assessed; documentation required from bidders; guidance on acceptable or preferred format for tenders; and contact details of lead officers on each service specification or details of the relevant telephone contacts within the local authority if groups need information or clarification.

Training for capacity builders planned for 27 September was cancelled at the last minute because no service specifications were available and so on 4 October, the Working Group met to discuss the delivery of a proposed programme of workshops. Because there had been no reply to the questions raised with the council and the cancelled training had not been rescheduled, Working Group members decided to write jointly to the council to explain that, with so little information and in order to protect their professional reputations and their relationships with groups, they were unable to undertake a formal contract with the local authority to provide support to groups on the commissioning process.

An updated information pack was finalised on 16 October with details of seventeen service specifications. It indicated that the deadline for receipt of tenders would be 14 January 2008, with a further information meeting scheduled for 29 October.

At this second event, the council announced the appointment of a team of consultants to provide support and training for groups considering a bid. This would involve one-to-one support by appointment, surgeries and workshops. Organisations working together on a consortia bid were offered an additional half-day support on the development of their partnerships.

On 5 December 2007, the Community Involvement Unit organised a networking lunch at Durning Hall Community Centre entitled *Commissioning: Working Together to Make It Work*, that invited groups, including those already working on consortia proposals, to and share what their organisation could potentially contribute to potential bids in each of the service specifications.

## The CIU's July 2007 research

An earlier study by the CIU in July 2007, entitled *Are You Ready for Commissioning?*, looked at the potential gaps in knowledge and capacity that may prevent voluntary, community and faith sector organisations from tendering to deliver services. In this report, we noted that the first consultation event in October 2006 was “for many groups attending... the first information they had received about the commissioning plans and for some, the first time they had been introduced to the concept of commissioning at all.” We found that by the summer of 2007, only a minority of groups who contributed to the study had ever participated in a commissioning process themselves and 62% were unsure that they were in a position to bid for contracts. Some of the key findings relating to barriers that might prevent groups from participating in the process itself included:

- **75% of respondents had fears about the process involved in contracting.**  
Comments highlighted fears about bureaucracy, lack of knowledge of the process or of what is involved and the need for grassroots support.
- **55% of respondents had concerns about the monitoring that might be involved in delivering a contract, whilst only 20% of groups felt that they are developed enough to take on a contract.**  
Comments included fears about the lack of skills and expertise to delivering commissioned service and that only larger voluntary groups would have the capacity and resources to do so.
- **40% felt unconfident about the response and support they anticipated they would receive from the Council**  
Concerns included the potential complexity and unfamiliarity of the bidding process and high expectations of small voluntary organisations from commissioners, rather than a lack of confidence in their ability to deliver quality services.

On the basis of our 2007 findings, we made a series of recommendations [appendix 2] to the London Borough of Newham and to local infrastructure organisations.

This report therefore also looks at what impact, if any, the July 2007 recommendations might have had on the commissioning process, based on the comments we have received after commissioning had been completed, and how many remain relevant to the future planning of commissioning.

## Summary of Findings

The following section summarises our analysis of the responses to the main areas covered by our questionnaire and the key findings that, when compared with the findings and recommendations of our July 2007 study, have enabled us to recommend positive steps to ensure that lessons are learned for future commissioning. We hope that these recommendations will be contribute to the development of a programme of on-going learning for voluntary, community and faith organisations and are heartened that the council's Strategic Procurement Unit has recruited a senior procurement officer with responsibilities for working to strengthen the third sector's involvement in commissioning.

At the mid-January 2008 deadline, there were a relatively small number of bids – around 70 – submitted for the 17 service specifications within the commissioning process. The success of commissioning can be judged not only on the number of tenders, however, but on whether it fulfilled the hopes set out in the foreword to the council's Commissioning Information Pack, of an *“accessible and equitable process through which the not-for-profit sector can be encouraged to demonstrate their potential to provide high quality, value for money services to the people of Newham.”*

Overall, the responses to our questionnaire suggest that many groups felt the commissioning process was confusing, that information was not always available at key points in its timetable and that there were inconsistencies in the information that was available and in support for the preparation of bids. The range of responses to a number of the questions we asked also suggests a lack of overall consistency throughout every area of the commissioning process.

A number of groups questioned whether there was sufficient planning of the commissioning process, including the consideration of good practice from other boroughs. There was some criticism of the quality of the service specifications themselves and how they fitted with other services. The responses from groups who chose not to submit bids because *“the service specifications didn't fit the work we want to do”* also suggests some confusion about the scope of the commissioning process from September 2007, a lack of understanding that it covered only the former grants programmes within NewCEYS and Culture & Community and that there may be further commissioning exercises in the future. This may point to issues concerning the advertising, promotion and availability of information before the commissioning process started.

There were also common concerns about the tight timescale available for commissioning and, with so many groups embarking on a largely unfamiliar process, about the amount of work that was therefore necessary to prepare and submit bids. In *Are You Ready for Commissioning?*, we warned that *“the timeframe for groups to ensure that every requirement is in place in preparation for the future commissioning may be inadequate to ensure that more than a few larger voluntary organisations are able to participate”*. We therefore recommended that before the start of commissioning, *“this needs to be factored into the overall timescale for both re-launching the delayed ‘grants to commissioning’ process and future commissioning.”* The evidence from respondents to our questionnaire suggests that the issue of allowing sufficient time for the process may not have been given sufficient weight in its planning.

Organisations that participated in consortium bids were more unhappy about the support they received than those who bid individually and a number were wary of the competitive nature of the partnerships that emerged. None of the respondents mentioned any positive or negative impact of the additional time available for consortia development by the consultants brought in

by Newham council. There were clearer differences in opinion between larger, more experienced organisations and smaller groups, with concerns about a lack of confidence in skills and preparedness for commissioning as important to the level of information that was available. Throughout the responses to the questions we asked was a general lack of self-assurance about the process, especially amongst smaller groups.

In *Are You Ready for Commissioning?*, we suggested that it might be useful for groups to receive “*basic training on the concept and culture of commissioning so that they fully understand how it works and what is involved.*” This may have benefited groups who decided not to engage with commissioning because they did not understand it well enough. The additional recommendation to provide “*case studies and examples... to show groups the processes involved and to highlight examples of where it was successful and unsuccessful*” might have been helpful even to those who said they struggled but managed to submit a tender.

### **General views on information and support**

With so few organisations having experience of commissioning, as we noted in our study in July 2007, the lack of availability of the service specifications at the start of the process appears to have had a negative impact on a most organisations’ confidence in the exercise they had been asked to take part in. This undoubtedly explains why the strongest criticisms were directed towards the council’s first information event. The second event appears to have been somewhat better received, but by this stage there were also growing concerns raised about the accessibility of information from the council’s website and about the written guidance that was provided to groups. Views on the provision of information and support indicate that there was some improvement as the process developed, but that there may have been an underestimation of the scale of what might be needed.

Many groups who spoke to one of the council’s team of consultants or to individual council officers said they found the support they received beneficial, although there appears to have been some problems with arranging meetings with the consultants and some concerns about inconsistencies in the information that was provided.

It is also evident that Newham’s second-tier organisations were unprepared for the way that the council intended to deliver commissioning. The lack of information at the start of the process, which was the key factor in the decision of Capacity Builders Working Group members to decline to enter into a formal support contract with Newham council, delayed the availability of one-to-one support even further.

### **Partnerships and consortia**

In its information pack, the council recognised that “*competition through the commissioning process is inevitable*” and that “*in order to equalise the commissioning process the Council is keen to encourage partnership or consortia bids, where appropriate, under a lead partner as identified and agreed by partnership or consortium members.*”

Overall concerns about the lack of time within the commissioning process seem to have been heightened by the additional responsibility of developing partnerships and responses to our questionnaire suggest that this led to greater frustration with difficulties in receiving support from consultants.

In *Are You Ready for Commissioning?*, we recommended that before the start of commissioning, *“training is provided on the idea and principles of partnership working”* and that *“funding is available for local infrastructure organisations to broker and facilitate partnerships”*. Both might have alleviated groups’ concerns and encouraged stronger partnerships. The ‘partnerships brokering’ network lunch organised by the Community Involvement Unit in December 2007 certainly seems to have been well received (which is backed up by the evaluation forms collected on the day), although by this stage a number of consortia were already under development and many who attended the event felt that they were late-comers to these discussions.

## Twelve Recommendations

1. That Newham council conducts a fuller survey of organisations' views of the NewCEYS and Culture & Community commissioning as part of its commitment to review the process.
2. To offer feedback to groups whose bids were unsuccessful, in order to contribute to voluntary, community and faith organisations' on-going learning.

### *Training and Learning*

3. That the council works with Newham's second-tier organisations to develop an urgent programme of training and learning for voluntary and community groups on:
  - the concepts and culture of commissioning.
  - principles of partnership working and consortia development.
  - quality systems to provide a focus for groups' 'commissioning-readiness'.
  - monitoring requirements to enable organisations to make an informed judgement about whether to bid to deliver public services

### *Information*

4. That fact sheets are developed to give general guidance to organisations on:
  - Eligibility criteria.
  - The appropriate format of tenders.
  - Newham council's position on full cost recovery, value-for-money and 'added value'.
  - Case studies highlighting examples of successful and unsuccessful tenders.
5. That the council's microsite at **[www.abetternewham.co.uk](http://www.abetternewham.co.uk)** is developed to include a third sector 'portal' for this general information and for updates on future commissioning processes. This could include an online forum or discussion board for information-sharing and promotion of consortia opportunities

### *Planning future commissioning*

6. That the council works in partnership with Newham's second-tier organisations in planning future commissioning processes, looking at:
  - Developing and testing quality, accessible information.
  - Methods of early publicity of the introduction of a new commissioning process.
  - Consultation on the improvement of service specifications.
7. That the 'bidding period' is extended in future commissioning processes to allow sufficient time for the development of genuine partnership bids.
8. That there is the inclusion of a 'clarification period' between the publishing of service specifications and the start of bidding.

9. That future commissioning learns from the experiences of the NewCEYS and Culture & Community process in pre-preparing answers to most frequently-asked questions.
10. That future commissioning should include greater access to council officers who drafted service specifications.

*Consortia development*

11. That funding is available for local infrastructure organisations to broker and facilitate partnerships during future commissioning processes.
12. That consideration is given to the provision of mentoring for small groups to enable them to deliver their part of a consortium commissioning contract (as Newham PCT has previously undertaken with its commissioning on Sexual Health)

# Methodology

The questionnaire was designed to cover five areas:

- General views on information and support
- The reasons why groups decided not to tender.
- The attitudes of those who submitted an individual bid about the support they had received.
- The attitudes of those who participated in a consortium bid about the support they had received.
- The attitudes of those who participated in a consortium bid about their level of confidence that their consortium represents a genuine and workable partnership

These areas reflect the anecdotal issues that had been raised by members of the Capacity Builders Working Group.

In order to understand the reasons why groups might have decided not to participate in the commissioning process, the CIU decided not to restrict the distribution of the questionnaire to only the groups that we knew had attended on one of the information events or those we were aware had submitted a bid. We felt that the questionnaire should be distributed as widely as possible, to as many groups that might have picked up information in some form about commissioning. However, with no funding for the study, questionnaires were sent out by e-mail only. Using the existing networks within the CIU, Newham Voluntary Sector Consortium and the Black & Ethnic Minority Community Care Forum, it was there sent to just over 200 organisations.

The deadline for the return of questionnaires was set so that organisations would answer questions before an announcement was made about successful bids. We felt that the outcome of decision-making on tenders might influence – positively and negatively – perceptions of the commissioning process itself.

Analysis of the questionnaires and the preparation of this report were undertaken by CIU staff.

We decided that it would also be helpful to compare the July 2007 study on the attitudes of groups on their preparedness for commissioning with their experience of the actual process. A number of the recommendations of this study related to the planning of commissioning, because in July 2007 the feedback from the previous year's consultation had not yet been released. However, a number of other recommendations focused on training, information and consortia development and the following seemed particularly relevant:

## *Training*

- Groups are given basic training on the concept and culture of commissioning so that they fully understand how it works and what is involved.
- Training is provided on the idea and principles of partnership working.
- Capacity building training offered by local infrastructure organisations to address the gaps in development that represent an obstacle to organisations participating in

commissioning, including encouragement and support for smaller groups to adopt a quality system such as PQASSO to provide a focus for their 'commissioning-readiness'.

- Specific training to be made available, in partnership between London Borough of Newham and local infrastructure organisations, that looks at the monitoring requirements of any organisation wishing to consider delivering public services in the future.

#### *Information*

- Case studies and examples are used to show groups the processes involved and to highlight examples of where it was successful and unsuccessful.

#### *Consortia development*

- Funding is available for local infrastructure organisations to broker and facilitate partnerships.
- Consideration is made for letting development contracts to local infrastructure organisations (as Newham PCT has previously undertaken with its commissioning on Sexual Health) to provide mentoring to small groups to enable them to deliver their commissioning contracts.

#### *Timescale of commissioning process*

- The timeframe for groups to ensure that every requirement is in place in preparation for the future commissioning may be inadequate to ensure that more than a few larger voluntary organisations are able to participate. This needs to be factored into the overall timescale for both re-launching the delayed 'grants to commissioning' process and future commissioning.

# Findings

## Information and Support

Our questionnaire asked groups about the different sources of information and support they had received about the commissioning process. The responses were as follows

	Responses
Newham council's website	8
An event run by Newham council	8
A consultant	4
A council officer	3
Another organisation	6
By e-mail	3
Received no support	2
Somewhere else	0

### Information meetings

The comments from respondents were mixed. There was criticism of the initial launch of the commissioning process at West Ham Town Hall in Stratford on 27 September 2007, which most respondents appeared to have attended. . Information packs were available and groups variously described these as “useful”, “adequate” and “too basic to be of any particular value.” The event itself was described by a number of groups as “a waste of time” and by others as “an absolute disgrace” and “in the most part, rubbish”. This seems to reflect frustration that service specifications were unavailable, which was the main reason that groups attended this event

There was a second information event in 29 October. At this event, Newham council announced that a team of 3 consultants has been taken on to undertake to provide support because members of the Capacity Builders Working Group had decided they were unable to undertake a formal contract to do so, There was only three comments specifically on this event. One said that the event was useful “but having [the event] close to the submission date was not convenient as all the necessary information required was not in place for the tender.” Another group said:

*The information about commissioning priorities was unclear from the outset, so time had to be invested in the second commissioning meeting in order to see IF it was relevant to our organisation. In the event our service was not offering the sorts of services likely to be commissioned, so it was a waste of time.*

Another commented that unlike the first event, *“the second was much better organised but couldn't give much in the way of answers.”*

### **Newham council's website**

The other main source of information was Newham council's website. One respondent said that it *“would have been helpful if the Council Q&A page was dated so new information would have been easier to identify”* and another commented that *“postings on the Council website were quite late.”* One suggested that *“it would have been useful to have one website with clear information and who to contact for more information”*.

### **Support from consultants and council officers**

Of the four respondents who received information from one of the consultants, one said that *“the two meetings with the consultant were very helpful.”* However, another commented that *“when we asked the consultant questions that she did not know, she promised to chase up the information and have the answers put on the Council website, but this never happened... I didn't feel the consultant was particularly knowledgeable about the process.”*

Two of the three respondents who received information directly from council officers reported more positive experiences, describing a [named] council officer as *“very helpful to translate the various information communicated throughout the long process”* and another as *“a steadfast rock in the prolonged pilgrimage.”* Another said the council officer they spoke to *“was very helpful.”* However, the third respondent who received information in this way complained that *“information from council officers was often inaccurate and sometime contradictory.”*

### **Support from other organisations**

Despite the Capacity Builders Working Group's decision not to provide formal advice on commissioning, a number of groups received information from other organisations. Our questionnaire did not ask groups to specify these other sources of information but these seem to have either been other members of a consortium or attendance at the Community Involvement Unit's networking lunch on 5 December 2007. On the former source of information, one respondent said:

*A colleague from another organisation had attended some of the workshops, and as part of the consortium I joined he was able to offer information and advice to the rest of us. Our lead partner appeared to have good information, but I felt reliant on what they had to say and I did not have independent information. We did not have the benefit of a consultant.*

One respondent said that *“the networking lunch was useful”* and another said:

*I felt that the consultation that took place at Durning Hall was interesting for the [bidding areas on] children and young people, play, drama etc. People appeared to know what they were doing but when spoken to on a one-to-one basis, people were looking for partners to go into consortium with and it was not clear who was taking the lead on some of the projects... Some big charities seemed to be surveying the land and were going in for the commissioning process and asked if small groups wanted to join, but small groups felt threatened of losing their ethos and objectives within the larger groups.*

## Overall impressions on information and support

The consensus from the groups who responded to our questionnaire was that quality information was inconsistent and often difficult to access. The following comments sum up these experiences:

*It was a bit vague, I wasn't always sure where things were with the process. I got information at different times and from different places.*

*We were left guessing at what was required; the guidelines lacked clarity and direction*

*It was hard work to get consistent and accurate information.*

*The information was adequate but the specifications were poor and inconsistent in style and content*

## Groups who chose not to submit commissioning bids

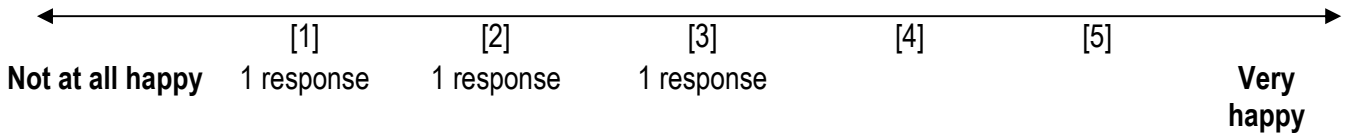
The five organisations who decided, once information had been provided, not to participate in submitting a commissioning bid, gave us the following reasons:

	Responses
We didn't understand enough about the process	4
There was too much work involved	4
We didn't have enough support	1
The information/support we received was confusing or unhelpful	2
We didn't fit the criteria as an organisation	0
The service specifications didn't fit the work we want to do	4
We didn't think we'd stand a chance	2

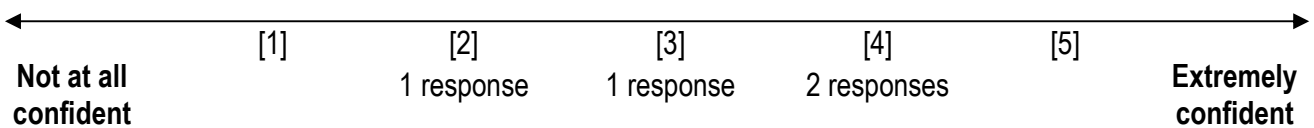
The provision of information was certainly one factor but not as important as the level of confidence about skills or preparedness for participation in commissioning. This group of respondents included two of the three unfunded community groups, two of the nine funded voluntary groups and the faith organisation.

## Groups who submitted consortium bids

We asked groups who made commissioning bids as part of a consortium to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their level of satisfaction with the support they had received, ranging from 'not at all happy' [1] to 'very happy' [5]. One did not respond and the remaining results were as follows:



Using the same method, we asked these groups how confident they were that their consortium represents a genuine and workable partnership. The responses were as follows:



The responses seem to reflect the concerns mentioned earlier about inconsistencies with the support that was available, but a more optimistic view of the abilities of voluntary and community organisations to work in partnership with each other. The group that was least happy with the support provided indicated that they had had difficulties with the consultant they worked with. They described their overall experience as “*extremely stressful and difficult*” and added:

*“The amount of staff time that was spent pulling the bids together is hardly worth the funds we’ve applied for. This could have been avoided if the guidelines had been a lot clearer and if there had been good quality practical training provided for groups that have never tendered for work before. I would have liked to have seen sample bids to get an idea of appropriate layout. Although we came up with something ourselves that we think worked well, we wasted a lot of time experimenting and agonising over whether it was what LBN wanted. We felt that our lack of experience in the commissioning process and the poor quality information from LBN put us at an unfair disadvantage; we were aware that we were competing with much larger organisations who have experienced teams of fundraisers well-versed in the commissioning process.”*

By contrast, the respondent who was most positive had received direct support from an individual council officer, rather than the consultants brought in by the council, and was from a larger voluntary organisation. In their comments, the respondent said:

*“The submission was not that hard to produce (both individual and consortium bids) as I had the support of my own organisation. I did not try and use LBN’s support network.”*

On the experience of tendering within a consortium, one group described the process as “*quite competitive*”, in which they felt they had been forced to choose between consortia, opting for a stronger bid and leaving another. The group said that “*this was quite uncomfortable and did not foster a spirit of partnership. Organisations that we chose not to be with, are still partner*

organisations with us, and so we need to be 'grown up' about how we continue to work together.”

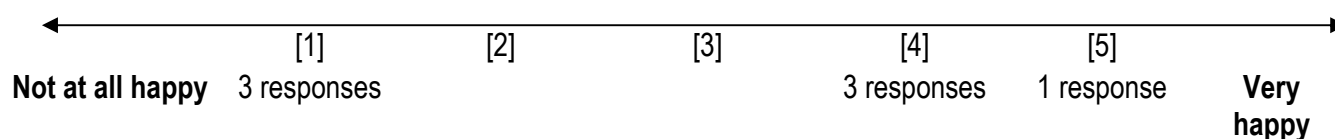
Another participant in a consortium bid described the process as “confusing” and “appeared to be run by people with little or no experience of commissioning.” They questioned whether the service specification they were planning to bid for had been considered alongside other services for older people in Newham and whether there had been “consultation with other commissioners in Adult Services about the 'fit'.”

One of the groups who had initially attended discussions about a consortium bid but later chose not to participate in the commissioning process made the following comment on consortium bids:

*“The timetable was too tight for developing well thought through partnerships / consortia. If the specifications had been announced 3 months earlier, it would have been easier. Only time will tell if the hastily arranged consortia can work OK.”*

### Groups who submitted individual bids

We asked groups who made individual commissioning bids to use the same five-point Likert scale to indicate their level of satisfaction with the support they had received. The results were as follows:



The organisations that were most satisfied also indicated that they had considerable experience within the voluntary sector and with tendering and had in most cases received support from the council’s consultants. One respondent commented that:

*“if I had not seen the consultant twice I would have totally missed the mark. I read through the papers and prepared what I thought was a good bid, but the consultant showed me where it was lacking, and also showed examples of what the Council was looking for – without ever telling me what I should write.”*

They added that:

*“I know of several organisations that did not apply, as the process was too intimidating. I worry that the grassroots voluntary sector is losing out to more sophisticated organisations at a time when our borough is undergoing dynamic change, and needs the rock of local people working together to meet local need.”*

Another respondent described their organisation as ‘lucky’ because they had rung the council for some general advice about a grant and spoken to a council officer who pointed them towards the commissioning process and a meeting with one of the consultants. They added:

*“I gathered all the relevant information to build a file. It took days and nights to finish .It is very difficult for a charity to prepare these documents and understand about the bid. I am*

*lucky, because I have knowledge in tendering and in accounting. But I am very much doubt all organisations [had] these facilities."*

The groups that were most dissatisfied with the support they were provided did not receive support from the council's consultants. They complained of a *"complete lack of guidance on the documentation... on how to structure the bid"* and described the need for the process to be *"a lot fairer by providing inexperienced groups with training that can equip them to compete with bigger organisations."* Another described the process as *"not-quite commissioning, more like a halfway between grants and commissioning"*, added that a programme with no clear programme of activities that would be purchased and no pre-qualification questionnaire to screen out unsuitable bids meant that they were expect to submit a bid *"on what we could do rather than how we would deliver, which is more usual in commissioning."* One respondent also said that *"the sector wasn't ready for full commissioning and the support provided was too little and too late."*

One respondent who had initially been part of a consortium bid but had decided to submit a bid individually described making this decision because of *"conflicting information on booking slots with consultants and not being able to get consultant to a meeting of consortium"*, as well as a *"lack of guidance on partnership discussions and how to avoid 'collusion' "*

## **General comments from respondents**

The questionnaire asked respondents whether they wished to add any additional comments about the commissioning process. One group *"felt the time scales were very tight, and we had to rush some of the thinking and planning, especially to fit everything in with the Christmas break"*, whilst a number expressed concerns that smaller groups may have been dissuaded from participating because, in the words of one respondent, *"many organisations were put off submitting bids because they are confused and frightened by the lack of suitable guidance"*. One group who did not make a bid commented:

*I know that this is a new adventure but it would have been nice to hear from people from other councils who have been through the process and what the advantages and disadvantages were. We should have had the 'VCS Engage'<sup>1</sup> group come down to talk to groups about the differences between grants and commissioning and this would have helped to make and informed decision on whether to tender for a commission or not.*

In terms of practical steps following the end of the bidding process, one respondent wanted feedback on their bids *"to know how we could have done better, if at all"* and another called for *"an action plan on how the process will be better"* for the next round of commissioning.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> **VCS Engage** is a national programme delivering training and support to help strengthen voluntary and community organisations involvement in the planning, commissioning and delivery of services for children, young people and their families under the Every Child Matters agenda. Its website is [www.vcsengage.org.uk](http://www.vcsengage.org.uk)



**CAPACITY BUILDERS  
WORKING GROUP**



Aston-Mansfield

*Generating community wealth for social change*

Community Involvement Unit

**COMMISSIONING QUESTIONNAIRE**

For groups that have applied or considered applying to Newham council under the new commissioning process

**PLEASE TICK ALL OPTIONS THAT APPLY TO YOU AND ADD COMMENTS WHEREVER APPROPRIATE.**

**Did you get information or support about commissioning from (tick all that apply)?**

Newham council's website  Another organisation

An event run by Newham council  By e-mail

A consultant  Received no support

A council officer

Somewhere else (please say where):

**How useful was this information or support? (Please give us much detail as possible).**

**Did you actually submit an commissioning bid (please tick all that apply)?**

- Yes, as part of a consortium bid
- Yes, as an individual organisation
- No

**If no, why did you decide not to go ahead (tick as many as you feel apply)?**

- We didn't understand enough about the process
- There was too much work involved
- We didn't have enough support
- The information/support we received was confusing or unhelpful
- We didn't fit the criteria as an organisation
- The service specifications didn't fit the work we want to do
- We didn't think we'd stand a chance
- Another reason (please say what):

**FOR GROUPS THAT SUBMITTED A BID AS PART OF A CONSORTIUM**

How happy are you with the support you received?

**TICK ONE BOX**

←-----→

Not at all happy      [1]      [2]      [3]      [4]      [5]      Very happy

How confident are you that the consortium represents a genuine and workable partnership? **TICK ONE**

**BOX**

←-----→

Not at all confident      [1]      [2]      [3]      [4]      [5]      Extremely confident

**FOR GROUPS THAT SUBMITTED A BID AS INDIVIDUAL ORGANISATIONS**

How happy are you with the support you received?

**TICK ONE BOX**

←-----→

Not at all happy      [1]      [2]      [3]      [4]      [5]      Very happy

**If you submitted a bid individually and/or as part of a consortium, what was your experience of the process?**

**Is there anything else you would like to say about the commissioning process?**

**Would you be willing to have a more in-depth discussion with us about your experiences at a time that is convenient to you?**

YES

NO

**If YES please give your name and contact number**

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### **About your organisation**

Please indicate whether your organisation is ONE of the following:

**AN UNFUNDED COMMUNITY GROUP**

**A FUNDED VOLUNTARY GROUP**

**A FAITH GROUP**

***Thank you for completing this form. Please e-mail to [anne.crisp@aston-mansfield.org.uk](mailto:anne.crisp@aston-mansfield.org.uk) or return by post (no stamp required) to***

**Aston-Mansfield Community Involvement Unit  
FREEPOST  
Earlham Grove, London E7 9BR**

## Appendix 2

# Recommendations from the *Are You Ready for Commissioning?* Report of July 2007

A full copy of the report is available from the Community Involvement Unit or from the Newham ChangeUp website at [www.newhamchangeup.info](http://www.newhamchangeup.info)

- Groups are given basic training on the concept and culture of commissioning so that they fully understand how it works and what is involved.
- Case studies and examples are used to show groups the processes involved and to highlight examples of where it was successful and unsuccessful.
- Training is provided on the idea and principles of partnership working.
- Funding is available for local infrastructure organisations to broker and facilitate partnerships.
- Capacity building training offered by local infrastructure organisations to address the gaps in development that represent an obstacle to organisations participating in commissioning, including encouragement and support for smaller groups to adopt a quality system such as PQASSO to provide a focus for their 'commissioning-readiness'.
- Specific training to be made available, in partnership between London Borough of Newham and local infrastructure organisations, that looks at the monitoring requirements of any organisation wishing to consider delivering public services in the future.
- The timeframe for groups to ensure that every requirement is in place in preparation for the future commissioning may be inadequate to ensure that more than a few larger voluntary organisations are able to participate. This needs to be factored into the overall timescale for both re-launching the delayed 'grants to commissioning' process and future commissioning.
- Consideration is made for letting development contracts to local infrastructure organisations (as Newham PCT has previously undertaken with its commissioning on Sexual Health) to provide mentoring to small groups to enable them to deliver their commissioning contracts.
- Newham Council designs its future commissioning in a way that is responsive and flexible, rather than opting for overly prescriptive 'tenders', allowing groups to negotiate the means by which their milestones and outcomes are achieved at the start of a successful bid and to innovate in the course of their contract.
- Newham Council plans commissioning as one part of the 'funding mix' available to third sector organisations that includes grant funding, for meeting new and emerging

needs in innovative ways or for supporting organisations whose aims and objectives preclude them from public services delivery.

- Newham Council's commissioning procedures clearly encourage the positive values that third sector organisations can bring to transforming public services and include selection criteria that are not based solely on price, quality and reliability, but also on flexibility, innovation and responsiveness to changing needs within local communities.
- In partnership with Local Infrastructure Organisations, Newham Council provides information, briefing events and, where possible, one to one support aimed at encouraging groups to fully demonstrate the specific values that they can bring to commissioning processes and on where groups can get further support.