

Think twice!

'Commissioning' is a word that is increasingly difficult to avoid. But what does it mean? APSE, LGIU and UNISON have produced a new commissioning guide for councillors that explains what Elected Members need to look out for.

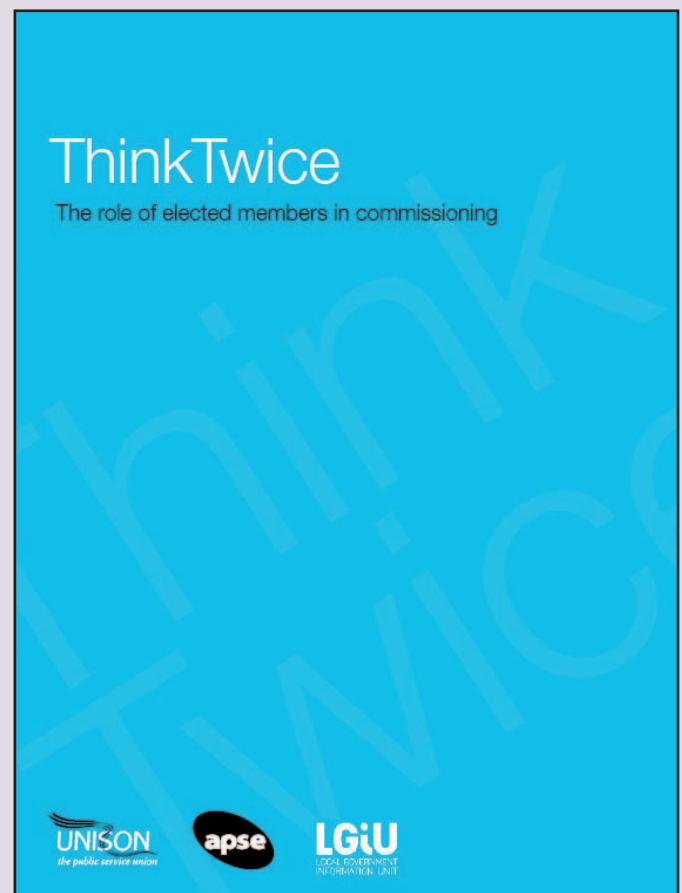
Commissioning can mean different things to different people but in reality it is about how services are designed and delivered. It should not be synonymous with outsourcing but some within the public services industry have attempted to redefine commissioning as simply a process of procurement. Commissioning should in its truest sense be provider neutral. As a process commissioning is not concerned with 'who' delivers a service but 'how' a service is delivered.

The role of the elected member in commissioning is critical. Elected members need to avoid commissioning being portrayed as simply a 'technical' issue because it is in fact largely a political process. Councillors are elected to determine how precious resources are spent, what the level of service provision will be and what outcomes they would wish to see locally. And in an increasingly complex environment, with local authorities needing to meet the national priorities from across the four UK administrations, as well as their own local priorities, now, more than ever, is the time for elected members to be able to exercise good judgement and control over the commissioning process.

An example of a commissioning strategy would be the way in which local refuse collection services are delivered. If councillors allow a contractor to determine the process and they act simply as a 'thin client' it would be for the contractor to determine when and what collections take place. They might be set a target on recycling rates but other than that the contractor would have widespread freedoms to determine collection processes. Under a commissioning strategy, which involves elected members, they could determine a range of specific features, such as larger bins for bigger households, fortnightly or weekly collections, increases in the numbers of recycling streams (food waste, paper, glass, cans) and also assisted collection for older people. Under a true commissioning process the service outcomes would be based on maintaining or improving customer satisfaction, reducing landfill, increased recycling or even integration of a 'waste to energy' scheme as part of a strategic interface with the councils waste disposal strategy.

Many elected members looking at the example of refuse collection may say that there is 'nothing new' in commissioning because that it is the role that they have undertaken for many years. And they are right in thinking that. Dangers only start to surface if 'commissioning' is used as a means to suggest that future service design, and delivery, can be determined by a procurement route involving a crude

market competition. At best this approach is unlikely to deliver the long term value for money savings often promised by the public services market (Audit commission report For Better, For Worse 2008) and worse still it could leave democratically elected members with little room for manoeuvre to respond to future needs within their communities. An inability to redirect resources if local needs or political priorities change for example to respond to economic circumstances would fetter local elected members. What councillor has ever been elected on a manifesto pledge of 'I can't do anything about that'? Now is the time to 'Think Twice!'



Copies of 'Think Twice: The role of elected members in commissioning' has already been distributed to councillors through your local authority's democratic services unit. If you would like a further copy please email Mo Baines at APSE on mbaines@apse.org.uk