

## Leading the way through the commissioning maze

*Cllr Arwyn Woolcock, member of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and national chair of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), urges fellow councillors to become more active in the commissioning process*

Commission is a word that is increasingly difficult to avoid, but what does it really mean to councillors who are trying to do the best for the communities they represent with ever-shrinking resources?

Perhaps it is easier to say what it is not. Commissioning is not simply procurement. It is not the same as market testing or outsourcing. And it is most certainly not a 'technical issue' to be left to officers.

Commissioning is about how services are designed and delivered – and as such it is of crucial importance to councillors elected to determine how precious resources are spent, levels of service and outcomes locally. And, in an increasingly complex environment, councillors need to take more of an active role in commissioning at every stage.

As one of the thousands of elected members attempting to best serve a local community, I welcomed publication of *Think Twice: The role of elected members in commissioning*, a new guide drawn up by the Association for Public Service Excellence, the Local Government Information Unit and UNISON. This guide helps councillors find a way through the commissioning maze and suggests how we can have more control of the process.

Intelligent commissioning is not merely a procurement exercise that specifies what is required and allows a contractor to determine the process. Take refuse collection for example. An effective commissioning strategy could mean elected members are closely involved in developing an approach based on improving customer satisfaction, reducing landfill, increased recycling or even integration of a 'waste to energy' scheme with the council's waste disposal activities.

Properly thought-through commissioning gives councils flexibility in response to changing circumstances such as environmental concerns. It also enables resources to be redirected if local needs, political priorities or economic conditions change.

Councils therefore need, in my view, to explore continuous improvement of in-house public services as an integral part of the commissioning cycle. They also need to retain the ability to deliver core services in-house so they do not become hostage to the market place.

As the economic outlook remains gloomy, the market cannot always deliver and people increasingly look to their local leaders for effective local solutions. Hopefully this guide, which has been sent to local authorities, should help councillors think twice and make the right decisions about delivering vital services to local communities.

For a copy of *Think Twice: The role of elected members in commissioning*, please email: [mbaines@apse.org.uk](mailto:mbaines@apse.org.uk)

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