



Patient and professional engagement in the procurement of dental services

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Objective: To describe the process of patient and professional engagement in the procurement of a specialist dental service. Stakeholder engagement is the practice of interacting with, and influencing, project stakeholders to the overall benefit of the project and its advocates. The successful completion of a project usually depends on how the stakeholders view it. Their requirements, expectations, perceptions, personal agendas and concerns will influence the project, shape what success looks like, and impact the outcomes that can be achieved. An engagement working group developed a work plan and communications strategy. Following initial scoping the engagement method and resources were developed. Engagement included patient and dentist questionnaires, interviews with specialists and hospital consultants, briefing papers and market engagement workshops. **Outcome:** Feedback from stakeholders provided reassurance of good access and quality, with 98% of patients expressing satisfaction with their overall treatment. Challenges included communication and administrative support. Learning points were diffusion of tension, developing a relationship based on trust, ensuring that stakeholder views are seen to be included in decision making and that there is flexibility in the engagement process. **Conclusions:** Good stakeholder engagement with an effective communications strategy is important in the procurement of dental services. Stakeholder engagement should aim to inform, involve, consult, collaborate and empower.

Keywords: Stakeholder engagement, dental commissioning

Public health competencies being illustrated

- 1) Policy and strategy development and implementation
 - Engages stakeholders
 - Involves patients and the public
 - Develops partnerships and networks
- 2) Strategic leadership and collaborative working for health
 - Demonstrates effective leadership
 - Demonstrates collaborative working
- 3) Appropriate attitude, ethical understanding and legal responsibilities

Initial impetus

Stakeholder engagement is the practice of interacting with, and influencing, those with an interest or concern about the project - to the overall benefit of the project and its advocates. The successful completion of a project usually depends on how the stakeholders view it; their requirements, expectations, perceptions, personal agendas and concerns will influence the project, shape what success looks like, and impact the outcomes that can be achieved. Successful stakeholder engagement is therefore a vital requirement for professional project management. As part of the procurement of a specialist dental service, a stakeholder engagement working group was set up and specifically tasked with engaging with and identifying the views of patients and dental professionals about current and future services. Its remit was to ensure that detailed information was provided to these groups in a timely

manner and that their opinions and concerns were captured and influential in the decision-making process. The engagement process sought to inform, involve, consult, collaborate and empower patients and dental professionals. The purpose of this paper is to describe a method of engaging with patients and dental professionals during the procurement of a specialist dental service.

The engagement process for this procurement was based on the following principles:

- Identifying and involving all relevant stakeholders
- Creating an environment where all stakeholders are able to participate freely
- Clear communication so that all stakeholders understand the goals, progress and decision-making process
- Listening, recording and honouring stakeholder perspectives

Solution suggested

An engagement working group was set up, which included dental specialists, general dentists, dental commissioners, procurement specialists, public health specialists, finance and patient representatives. The initial task of the group was the development of engagement and communication strategies.

Stakeholders were engaged using the following methods:

Scoping

Identification of stakeholders and initial discussions around areas to be explored; the group agreed that the core stakeholders would be patients in treatment, specialists, referring general dentists and hospital consultants. The wider stakeholders included patient groups, specialist societies, and professional groups such as Local Dental Networks, the British Dental Association, and Local Dental Committees.

Developing

Questionnaires for patients and general dentists were developed and piloted. Topic guides for interviews of primary care specialists and hospital consultants were developed. Members of the working group, including patient representatives who contributed to the development of the questions and topic guides, had an opportunity to comment on them. The questionnaires and interviews sought to collect stakeholder views on access to specialist dental services as well as patient and dentist experience.

Engagement

The engagement activities included:

- An online questionnaire sent to all general dental practices in the area
- A patient questionnaire sent to a random sample of specialist practices for their patients to complete
- Face-to-face interviews carried out with primary care specialists and hospital consultants
- A briefing paper that was developed by the project team and widely circulated to the core and wider stakeholders
- A frequently asked questions document that was developed and widely distributed to providers who had expressed an interest in the procurement
- Two market engagement workshops organised for stakeholders to be informed about the proposed services and the bidding process, to air their views and to ask questions.

Actual outcome

The outcome from the stakeholder exercise included the following:

- Four reports from the survey responses of patients, general dental practitioners, primary care specialists and hospital consultants
- The delivery of two market engagement workshops attended by a total of 300 delegates with a combined evaluation report from both market engagement workshops

- Briefing papers to provide updates on the progress of and future activities regarding the procurement
- A frequently asked questions document that included all questions posed at the market engagement events as well as questions sent to the procurement and commissioning teams
- A revised service specification which reflected the views of the stakeholders

Feedback from the stakeholder engagement activities provided reassurance that services were accessible and of good quality. It also identified some areas of concern including flexibility of appointments. Patient and general dentist satisfaction and the NHS Friends and Family Test (FFT) were established by questionnaires. The FFT asks people if they would recommend the services they have used and provides a mechanism to highlight both good and poor patient experience. There were very high satisfaction scores reported in this study; 98% of patients were satisfied with their overall treatment and 99% claimed they would refer family and friends to their specialist practice. Patients and parents, in response to a question in the questionnaire requested that appointments be made available at weekends or after school and preferred to be contacted by text or email with fewer patients preferring traditional postal method of contact. These concerns were taken on board and addressed.

Data from the evaluation of the engagement workshops found that most attendees had better clarity and increased understanding of how the service was developed and how the bidding process would work. A majority of attendees provided affirmative feedback that the knowledge gained from the workshops would influence their approach to preparing bids.

Challenges addressed

Communication

Communication was key to this stakeholder engagement process. Despite the development and implementation of a communications strategy intended to inform and involve stakeholders throughout the various activities, some stakeholders felt that they did not know why the procurement was happening and that details of how the bidding process operated had not been provided. Despite transparency from the outset that only a limited number of randomly selected practices would be invited to take part in the stakeholder engagement, a few specialists expressed their unhappiness that they had not been invited to interview. This was addressed by continuous communication and ensuring that all questions and answers were made available to all. Communication was also made available to other organisations such as the British Dental Association, Local Dental Committees and other dental networks. These organisations were invited to and attended the stakeholder events and were able to disseminate information to their members. The lesson learned is that however thorough and robust the communication plan, there may still be stakeholders who feel that they are not being involved or informed about the process.

Administrative support

The engagement working group was provided with administrative support for organising meetings and note taking. Support for data input for the patient questionnaire was initially problematic and additional resources had to be identified; the authors would therefore recommend comprehensive administrative support is identified from the outset.

Future implications and learning points

Planning, accountability and governance

The work stream agreed a strategy, terms of reference, a work plan, a communications strategy and a risk register. Accountability was via monthly written reports to a project board. This ensured that the project board was made aware of the progress of planned actions and also provided an opportunity for areas of concern to be addressed. Careful planning and clear accountability arrangements can bring significant benefits including minimising the risk of tokenism and having a proper audit trail of processes and actions in the event of a legal challenge to the outcome of the procurement.

Ensuring that stakeholder views are included/ seen to be included in the decision-making process

Engaging all those involved in the development of a new service in early planning is essential and will ensure that all relevant stakeholders are informed about the purpose, scope, risks of the new service and the process of implementation. Effective working relationships were developed by providing all those involved with responses to their questions and concerns, and by ensuring that their views were incorporated and seen to be incorporated into the service model. For example, in response to patient requests, the service specification was amended to include a requirement for evening and weekend appointments.

Diffusion of tension and developing a relationship based on trust

The specialists were concerned about the bidding process; many of them had not been involved in bidding for a dental service before. In addition, information coming from other NHS England regions contributed to confusion, concern and worry. On-going communication, listening and responding to stakeholders ensured that a relationship based on trust was developed. The delivery of the engagement workshops was strategically structured to include short presentations and allow for a substantial question and answer session. This provided an opportunity respond, clarify and reassure the stakeholders. Thereafter, questions and answers were shared with all involved.

Bottom up approach

Engagement is everyone's responsibility. Stakeholder involvement in decision making and a bottom up approach was crucial to this engagement process. All members of the project group were asked to comment on the engagement resources being developed. As a result of comments from specialists, structured interviews were carried out instead of questionnaires as they felt this would enable topics to

be explored in greater detail and provide opportunity for specialists to raise other areas of concern. Involvement of the wider stakeholders ensured that general dentists were made aware of the details of the project and were encouraged to complete the questionnaires. The patient representatives attended all working group meetings and the two workshops; they contributed to the development of the patient questionnaire, ensuring readability and the use of patient and public friendly language. This bottom up approach ensured that a delivery solution was negotiated and acceptable to a majority of the stakeholders.

Flexibility in engagement process

Some flexibility is necessary in order to respond to challenges, stakeholder advice and concerns. The stakeholder engagement project plan had to be flexible enough to accommodate unplanned delays and the interviewers had to be flexible with the days and timing of appointments to suit the availability of those being interviewed; this included appointments very early in the morning or late evening.

Digital technology

The general dental practitioner questionnaire was administered using an electronic questionnaire platform, which was considered to be easier for general dental practitioners to complete than postal questionnaires. This platform automatically organised the data into a spreadsheet without additional data input.

The majority of communication with potential bidders was through a procurement portal. All those interested in the procurement of specialist services were required to register on the portal; this enabled interested bidders, many of whom had not previously experienced a procurement, to learn at an early stage in the process how to use the portal and access all project documentation on-line.

Sufficient workforce

Good administrative support was needed to carry out the stakeholder engagement. This included general organisation, setting up meetings, room booking, preparing documents and communicating with stakeholders. Extra support was needed for organising the two stakeholder workshops, which were attended by approximately 300 attendees. Without this support it would have been difficult to deliver the stakeholder engagement activities.

Conclusion

This article has described a method of engaging with patients and dental professionals during the procurement of a specialist dental service. Feedback from stakeholders suggested that they were generally satisfied with the services being provided. The feedback also identified areas of concern which were addressed.

Stakeholder engagement should inform, involve, consult, collaborate and empower. Thorough planning, implementation of strategies to ensure accountability, a comprehensive engagement strategy and understanding the different layers of stakeholder engagement can help to develop a relationship based on trust between patients, dental professionals and planning organisations.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the patients, general and specialist dental practitioners for participating in this project. They would also like to thank the NHS England dental commissioning team for their support. Thanks also go to Dr Marilena Korkodilos, Deputy Director Specialist Public Health Services Public Health England (London).

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