

# Commissioning under pressure – getting off on the right foot

**“Commission: verb, order or authorise the production of something; bring (something newly produced) into working condition”** [en.oxforddictionaries.com]

## Advice is often ordered...

Mayors, Council or senior management are the ultimate destination of most advice. Their priorities are therefore vital for your workplan. Eliciting their current interests and wants is an important role for managers and senior advisors. Ideally, it's good to have a view on the long term work programme too – as some issues take a long time to get through the research, engagement, consideration and decision-making phases.

Commissioning is much easier in the situation where the work is an integral part of an overall workplan as the context and issues will be well known. The group may also have time to think about the issue and plan for the work ahead of time.

However, other commissions can ‘pop out’ from a discussion in a formal meeting or as a response to an emerging event.

This Masterclass deals more with the latter. Although many of the lessons also might apply to more planned commissioning.

## ...but then must pass to the team for action....

So, in these circumstances the first step in meeting the request is to activate the ‘delivery system’.

This is simple but it can still go wrong.

The initial challenge is to communicate the request to the responsible manager, advisor or team of advisors accurately and effectively. Often that person won't have heard the request and the background to it – only the senior officer present at the meeting will have. And often there is a high state of complexity to the request and typically confusion in the surrounding conditions.

The old joke, whereby, as the vital message is passed from mouth, to ear, to mouth, to ..., “send reinforcements we're going to advance,” becomes, “send three and four pence we're going to a dance,” is still a valid risk, despite the decimalisation of the currency.

So, however the process starts, and whatever the chain of communication/command involved, it is vital that the following steps are part of it:

1. The specification (including key aspects, such as what it is going to be used for) is WRITTEN DOWN.
2. This written output statement is approved by a process that gives it appropriate validity – a mandate.

Written briefings are important, as it's easy to forget everything that was said, especially if the conversation was a rushed affair.

Some organisations we know have set up formal structures to establish and manage policy projects. They seem to be based on engineering or IT project planning models and have their strengths. But can be over engineered and not particularly responsive in urgent situations (and therefore break down through lack of use).

## Look at your significance and engagement policy

The extent to which you need to engage with stakeholders and the wider community, and the choice of engagement mechanism, has a big impact on the planning of a project. It impacts on timeframes, the resourcing needed, and the overall project approach.

These policies are also a tool to help determine the scale and complexity of any issue. Always a good idea, at the beginning.

Therefore, applying the significance and engagement policy is something to do early in the commission phase.

## Things can change abruptly

The problem analysts face is that in many policy settings not only do the (metaphorical) goalposts move, but often even the game and its location changes. After all, the wider backdrop to advice is the fast-moving world of politics, where the priorities can shift very quickly and with little warning.

What was ordered up as a backgrounder may turn into an urgent decision piece, or, on the other hand, be dropped from the ‘front burner’ to be replaced by a newly salient issue previously out of scope. And the drivers for this ‘shock’ can be external to the work (as the wider scene shifts) or internal, as new information casts the project into a different light. This can be tough going for analysts and managers!

Conceptually this shift can involve significant variation of all, or any combination of:

- The problem definition.
- Whether there will be consultation, or how much, e.g. the fit with the significance and engagement policy.
- The feasible solution set.
- The budget or scale.
- The timetable.
- The path to implementation.
- The way the decision is to be taken (it might be headed full speed for Council, then end up being referred to the CE for decision – or vice versa).

The management/analyst team thus needs to stay on top of the drivers of such shifts and be sufficiently flexible to respond aptly in scale and scope. Typically, this aspect of the role is up to the senior managers in your team.

### Changes may even force repeated mandates

In addition to the effects of changes in the environment, the process of working to a tight brief can involve going back to re-commission or re-scope the work. It may be that new information shows that core assumptions are false, or even that what was thought to be the problem isn't. Whatever has changed, such 'shocks' mean the task is a 'new beast' now and needs a fresh mandate and direction.

This manoeuvring may repeat several times, especially if the commissioning started with a limited knowledge of the issue. Managing the process becomes demanding.

And a vital part of the management and leadership task is to judge which/when the questions must go back to whoever commissioned the work, and when they can be handled within the existing brief.

### Mid-flight refinements

If you get a chance to discuss the issue with the original commissioner again, take it.

Providing that person with some information about what you've uncovered in the analysis will help them to decide whether their original request was the right one, or whether they need to modify that initial brief.

### The boss as proxy commissioner

The responsible manager, within the group, as is likely to be in the position of representing elected members' interests in commissioning the work. Afterall, it's most likely that they were at the meeting when the issue came up, and will be in attendance when the 'answer' goes back up!

This isn't an easy job. It involves balancing what was requested with both what is practical and feasible in preparing advice, as well as the actual issues thrown up in the process of analysis.

The type of final output sought by these policy commissions tends not to be well pre-specified – as hinted above, this sort of job is usually a response to what MacMillan<sup>1</sup> is reputed to have referred to as 'events': random shocks posing hard questions to the body politic. As these draw public attention, they must be addressed and a political answer reached.

This means the advisor/analyst is often being set a question to which there is not a simple good answer. Thus, sound work nearly always demands flair, and a degree of lateral thinking. The analyst's craft skills need to be fully engaged.

### Horses for courses – making it happen

These project type tasks can be described with the same broad wording, but they are varied in nature. Smart shops will vary their approach and the style brought to the commissioning role.

This means the process used will change with the scale, nature and complexity of the work. A large piece on an under-researched topic, due next week, means a team; while work in a well-trodden area with a longer time scale can comfortably be handled by a single responsible analyst.

Picking the right analyst is often critical. The commissioner often needs to work out whether subject knowledge and networks are more important than craft skill and general ability.

### Significance and engagement

One of the early parts of the commissioning process should consider your significance and engagement policy. This prompts analysts to look carefully at the scale and impact of the issue, and therefore what sort of engagement is required.

The action required under this policy should become part of the commissioning brief.

### Practical tips

#### Ideal approach

Tight/loose commissioning works best when a few simple rules are followed when briefing the analysts:

#### Don't tell them how.

#### Do tell them what:

- Who the client is.
- What the writer is expected to do.
- What would be the best outcome (if known).
- What's the minimum that would work.

<sup>1</sup> Harold MacMillan UK Prime Minister 1957- 1963, might have once responded to a question about what might blow governments off course with, "Events, dear boy, events."

- What basic worries are perturbing the client.
- What is the work trying to do – action or information.
- What's at stake – how big is it (impact, resources, risks).
- What's absolutely fixed in the timetable – so what could give.
- Options – close out or open up?
- What's the timing?
- How much risk is there? And how much can be tolerated?
- What degree of consultation – who, and how wide?<sup>2</sup>

In case of emergency – focus on nine key factors:

- What's broken? Or where is the opportunity?
- How big is it?
- What do we know about it already?
- What sort of solution – short term or long term?
- Does it fit with other policy/planning processes currently underway e.g. can it be dealt with in the long term plan process? Or part of an upcoming bylaw review? Or as part of the annual budget process?

### Longer term – learn from the results

This sort of capability is part of the bread and butter of a sound policy shop. To keep getting better demands a 'learning approach.' For commissioning as described here, it means working to improve the process as sketched.

And a critical factor in this is to include a feedback loop.

It's always a good idea to de-brief on how a project went and how it was received by the ultimate customer. As always, the best outcomes come when these are carefully positive.

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<sup>2</sup> Your significance and Engagement Policy should be applied to help determine this.