

SERVICE REVIEWS – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

As part of the Transforming Community Services programme PCT commissioning arms are expected to “have developed a detailed plan for transforming community services [and] priorities for improvement and service development”.

These plans are meant to determine the future shape of provider services. It is therefore vital that proper and effective consultation takes place between the PCT and staff and trade unions.

By effectively engaging in the service review process, UNISON can ensure that NHS options remain on the table and can put the case for an in-house improvement plan. Proper consultation will ensure that staff views are taken into account as part of the review process and may help to make the case against tendering PCT services to private companies.

Some NHS staff may have come across ‘service reviews’ being used as an excuse to ‘restructure services’, where ill-considered service cuts are based on financial rather than service need, posts are cut and job down-banded. With any engagement in the service review process, it is important to stress that the ‘service review’ should not be a cloak for cutting services – but instead is about finding ways to deliver the highest quality services and to retain direct NHS provision.

The guidance below is based on the information provided in UNISON’s guide to campaigning and negotiating around procurement – From Commissioning to Contract Evaluation.

Where PCTs are threatening to put all their services out to tender it is important to press for a full service review of current services in order to be able to demonstrate that in-house services are efficient and effective or to draw up an improvement plan.

The purpose of service reviews

Service reviews are a very powerful tool in examining current performance and identifying how to secure improvement in service delivery. If used properly they can provide the means for a UNISON branch to engage actively to promote an alternative to outsourcing services.

While UNISON branches may not be resourced to become experts in service reviews it is important to understand the steps that should be involved, have a copy of the review plan or timescales and ask for copies of all documents and reports produced in relation to the review.

The main steps of a service review are as follows:

1. Establishing a frame of reference

Objectives

This relates to the objectives of the exercise and should be clearly established at the beginning. Objectives could range from gathering information on how well the PCT is performing, through to seeking to ensure that services are operating at optimum efficiency.

What outcome is expected from the review?

At its most general level this will usually be the achievement of the PCT’s policy objectives at minimum cost to the public.

2. Collecting information on the services

The next stage is to collect baseline data on the current service which includes:

- What does the service do?

- Why does it do it?
- How much does it cost?
- How many people does it employ including those that are brought in on a temporary basis through an employment agency or as consultants?
- How does the service gauge whether it has done what it says it is going to do?

3. Evaluating the evidence

The next stage involves an analysis of what the evidence suggests about how the service is performing.

Collection and use of performance data:

Can the service demonstrate that it contributes to the delivery of the PCT's overall corporate policy objectives/outcomes?

Analysis of business processes:

Is the service able to describe its main business processes in a way that is clearly understandable?
Does the service benchmark its processes against other providers?

Continual improvement:

Can the service demonstrate continuous improvement over the last three years in terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness to reflect the balance between the three elements required at a strategic level?

Evidence will include:

- increased outputs
- improved outcomes
- meeting short term targets and moving towards long term targets
- demonstrable service impact
- efficiency savings

Views of service users and staff:

What are the views of service users expressed through customer care systems and community organisations?

What are the views of staff and trade unions and their commitment to service improvement?

What are the implications of options for jobs, terms and conditions?

Corporate policies and priorities:

How does the service contribute towards improving sustainable development?

What is the contribution of the service to equalities, diversity and community wellbeing?

KEY ACTION POINTS FOR UNISON BRANCHES

- In all circumstances where procurement is proposed and services have not been reviewed, put the case for carrying out a service review
- Ensure that you are aware of service review techniques and consider training UNISON stewards to take part in reviews
- Get members involved in a service review. They are best placed to identify weaknesses and problems and suggest ways services can be improved
- make sure that UNISON representatives are fully involved in the review process, receive all documentation and reports and are also involved in any subsequent options appraisal
- Ensure that participation does not compromise the ability of UNISON to put its case effectively – make sure that proper protocols are in place at the outset of a review
- Communicate effectively with all staff affected by a review and ensure that their views are taken into account
- Remember that UNISON's policy is to support service improvement process as a tool to keep services in-house and avoid the active procurement stage.

At the end of a service review process there are a number of possible outcomes:

- The service meets the necessary performance standards and requirements of the service users and the PCT and an in-house service improvement plan is put in place to drive continuous improvement in the service until the next review. This approach further avoids a costly and resource hungry procurement exercise.
- The analysis shows that there is a weakness in service performance and further action is considered. This could involve:
 - a. retention of the current service in-house supported by a three-year service improvement plan
 - b. procurement exercise with an in-house bid
 - c. procurement exercise without an in-house bid.

Where the outcome of the review points to service weakness, an options appraisal would normally be carried out. Firstly however, the authority should consider the development of a service improvement plan (SIP). Service improvement should be the first step before any further procurement options are considered unless there are other circumstances that would prevent such an approach such as the service is not viable without access to external investment. This should however, have been identified as part of the service review process.

SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLANS (SIP)

Service Improvement Plans (SIPs) have a vital role in providing evidence for, and substantiating in-house provision. They should combine a vision for the service with strategy and a programme, which sets the course for the service over a three-year period.

The SIP must convey to executive and non-executive members of PCTs, service users, and staff and inspection bodies that an in-house option has clarity and is sustainable.

A SIP is in effect a commitment to improve the quality of the service and sets out the activities and action required to achieve improvement.

It is vital that UNISON members play an active role in shaping and developing the SIP. The union should harness the knowledge and expertise of members through regular meetings and working groups.

It is also a tool to hold management accountable for progress, to build staff support, facilitate wider community engagement and enable scrutiny to review and assess the improvement programme.

Key action points for UNISON branches:

- ensure that UNISON and its members are involved in the development of a SIP and that the agreed actions are communicated effectively to members
- where the SIP will involve changes to staff working practices and/or terms and conditions ensure that this is subject to proper consultation and negotiation in accordance with agreed procedures
- ensure that UNISON is involved in monitoring and reviewing the outputs and outcomes of the SIP
- where a successful SIP is put in place make sure that the lessons learned from the process are incorporated into the branch strategy and information and intelligence is fed back to the regional office of UNISON so that the success can be publicised and learning opportunities for UNISON maximised.