



Case Study

Working with the Independent Sector - A Guide to Success:
The NHS Peterborough Experience

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Client profile

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Deciding to commission an independent sector provider to deliver a service which has always been delivered by the NHS can be a big step, especially for commissioners who have never worked with a provider like this before. However, the direction of travel started during Lord Darzi's review and encouraged by the new NHS agenda means that more commissioners will find themselves doing just that.

Last year, NHS Peterborough (NHSP) commissioned private diagnostics provider InHealth to deliver a new community based audiology service. Christine Daff, a Senior Commissioning Manager at NHSP shares her experience of working with an independent sector provider for the first time and how NHSP made it work for them.

“There was no conscious decision to use an independent provider. However we did want to take audiology out of the hospital environment and deliver it in a community location. When we put the service out to tender and evaluated the responses, it was clear that an external provider was the right way for us to go, as they were able to deliver the service we wanted more efficiently and effectively than anyone else.”

In the future many will find themselves in this position; managing a brand new type of commissioning while reorganising a service, with very little experience of setting up or managing this sort of contract with the private sector. It can be easy to underestimate the difference between commissioning services from an NHS provider and entering into a partnership with the private sector. However, Christine warns against treating a contract with the independent sector just like any other commissioning process. She points out that to do so can cause difficulties and miss key opportunities for the NHS to benefit from skills and experience which lie within the independent sector.

Developing a Partnership

“As a commissioner, it became clear to us that in order to be effective, you cannot just award a contract and then leave the supplier to ‘get on with it’. It is about developing a partnership with your provider and really understanding where they can add more value and offer additional support.



“The transfer of service from the hospital to the community was always going to be challenging, and as we expected there were problems. However, the additional support we got from our provider in resolving these issues was an unexpected advantage.”

Taking a fresh look

Using the independent sector to deliver services also has the advantage of introducing a new level of flexibility into local health economies and putting existing practices under the spotlight. A fresh look at existing models and pathways around these services can identify more efficient ways of working and unlock real benefits for patients and the rest of the local health service.

“Working with a new independent sector provider really did give us the opportunity to start again and use our joint expertise to deliver a more efficient, effective service for local people. For example, when a patient had to be referred from our audiology service into the hospital ENT department for further treatment, the referral letters were going from the audiology department to the patient’s GP and then he/ she had to send the letter onto the hospital.

Our provider quickly identified this inefficiency in the system and negotiated to streamline the process. Audiology referrals to the ENT department now go direct to the hospital giving our patients a faster service and using our resources more efficiently.”

Good commissioning arrangements with the independent sector should also provide an excellent opportunity to keep looking at the service over time and hold the provider to account for remaining innovative and flexible as patients’ needs change.

“Once the initial time investment is put in, a partnership with an independent sector provider can really help a commissioner to realise new ambitions for the best patient care possible, without the restrictions of working within systems which can make innovation more difficult. Providers have a very real vested interest in delivering the best patient experience possible and can be properly held to account on that basis.

One Stop Shop Model

“For example, as things have evolved we are now working towards offering a one stop shop model to more of our audiology patients. Some can already have an assessment and fitting on the same day, but we are working to offer this to a wider number of patients. The service never stands still, we are constantly striving for improvement and considering whether we could do things differently.”

However, no matter how comfortable the commissioners are with the concept of working with the independent sector, many still fear a negative reaction from the public and patients. Christine points to the newness of the idea of partnerships with providers from outside the NHS as being at the root of this issue, especially with older patients.



“It really is a fear of the unknown. Audiology has a high number of older patients and in some cases the concept of a private sector provider generated a bit of confusion. Spending time talking to your patients at the beginning of the process and allaying their fears is really very important.

“On the whole we discovered that people were fearful of the concept rather than unhappy with the service and we had relatively few actual complaints. They just needed some reassurance that it was still an NHS service and still free.

“A year later these concerns have almost disappeared as patients see the benefits of their new local service. However I think the initial reaction must be carefully managed by commissioners to ensure that patients are well informed and understand the benefits.”

Partnership Approach

Reflecting on the experience overall Christine said: “I would say that working with an independent sector provider to move our service into the community has worked well for us. We are commissioning a service which works much more closely around our patients’ needs and we are seeing real benefits from the partnership approach we have with InHealth.

“It has required determination and commissioners must understand that they cannot award contracts to independent sector providers and then disengage from the process. In order to get the best from any provider a partnership needs to be established, only then can a commissioner fully take advantage of the flexibility and responsiveness a good provider will bring to improving patient care.”

Paul Embley is Director of Primary Care Diagnostics at InHealth and manages the delivery of the NHS Peterborough contract. He adds his advice:

“Private sector providers working with commissioners who are transferring services into the community and working with the independent sector for the first time must be prepared to work hard to gain the confidence and earn the trust of their commissioner partners. They must take responsibility for educating them about the potential added benefits a partnership approach can bring.

“It is also important to be committed to the service they are delivering and remain flexible as the contract progresses. There are always changes and services must keep evolving to meet patients’ needs. It’s our job to make sure that we are responsive and supportive and that together we deliver the best services for NHS patients.”

