



Frontline agencies in partnership

Experiences of Commissioning

An online survey of Homeless Link
member organisations





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Executive Summary

Commissioning is very important issue for Homeless Link member organisations, as a significant part of their income is gained from providing commissioned services.

Homeless Link has heard that the changes in commissioning processes over recent years have affected member organisations. This survey was conducted with the aim of gathering information from these organisations, to understand the issues facing them and to collect evidence for these views.

Representatives of all Homeless Link member organisations were emailed a request to participate in an on-line self-completion survey. The survey asked about the type of experience (whether positive, negative or mixed) that people have had of thirteen aspects of the commissioning process, and what evidence they could provide on these issues.

Overall the results show that respondents' experiences of many of the aspects related to the commissioning process are mixed.

Experiences of forming consortium bids and the increased focus on outcomes were both mainly positive. Conversely, experiences relating to application timescales, the knowledge and expertise of commissioners in public bodies, and the increased focus on price rather than quality, were all mainly negative.

In some cases, a significant proportion of respondents stated that they had no experience of the aspect in question. For example, commissioning under LAAs and commissioning related to individual budgets.

For each aspect, this report provides a graph of the results and comments from the respondents. The comments are an important part of the findings as they provide an insight into respondents' reported experiences.



PART A - BACKGROUND

1. Introduction

Commissioning is a very important issue for Homeless Link member organisations, as a significant part of their income is gained from providing commissioned services.

Homeless Link has heard that the changes in commissioning processes over recent years have affected member organisations. This survey was conducted with the aim of gathering information from these organisations, to understand the issues facing them and to collect evidence for these views.

2. Method

Representatives of all Homeless Link member organisations were emailed a request to participate in an on-line self-completion survey, accessed via a web link contained in the email. Participation was voluntary and people were able to forward the link to other homelessness organisations as appropriate.

The survey asked about the type of experience (whether positive, negative or mixed) that people have had of thirteen aspects of the commissioning process, and what evidence they could provide on these issues.

3. The sample

3.1 Survey response

The survey achieved over 60 initial registrations of details, resulting in 43 completed surveys.

Respondents did not necessarily answer every question, so the numbers on which each question response is based (the 'base') varies slightly between questions, and is stated below each graph.

3.2 Interpretation of results

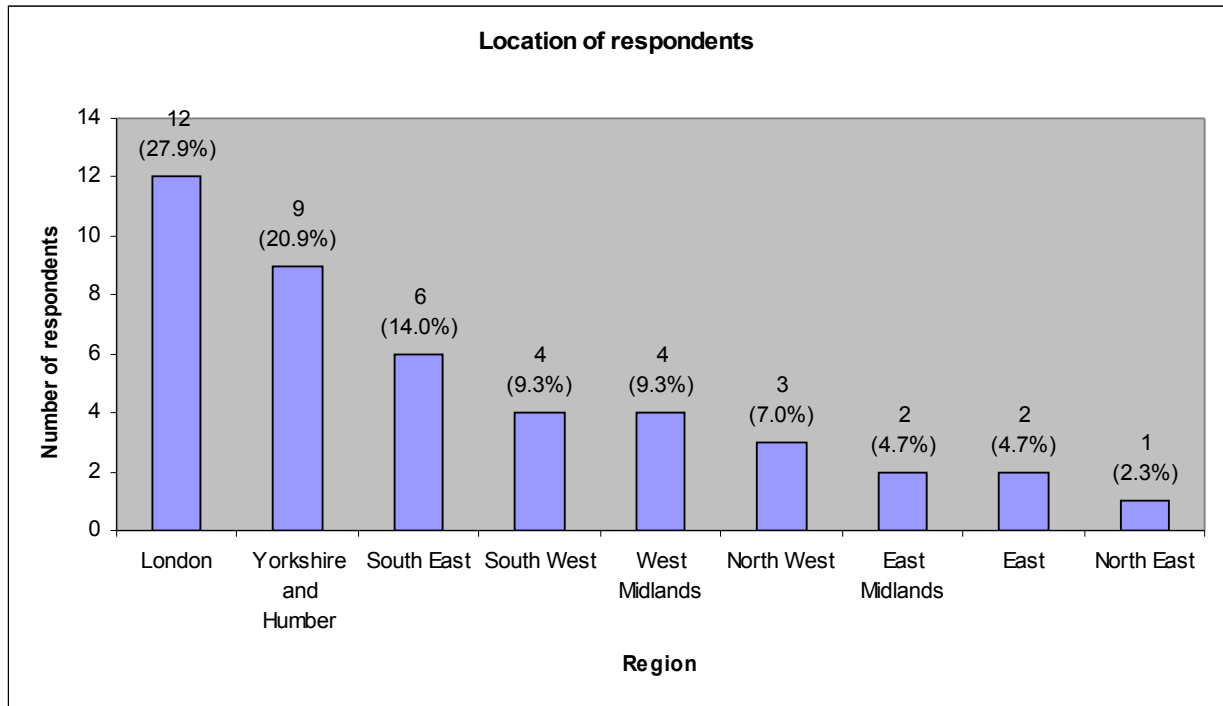
As the total number of responses is fairly small, even seemingly high percentages of responses in a particular sub group correspond to relatively low numbers of people. For this reason both percentages and numerical values are included in the report, and the results should be interpreted with caution.

3.3 The respondents and their organisations

The respondents were mainly a mixture of Chief Executives and people in departmental/service 'manager' level roles, with slightly more in the latter category. The vast majority were from voluntary organisations.

3.4 Geographical location of respondents

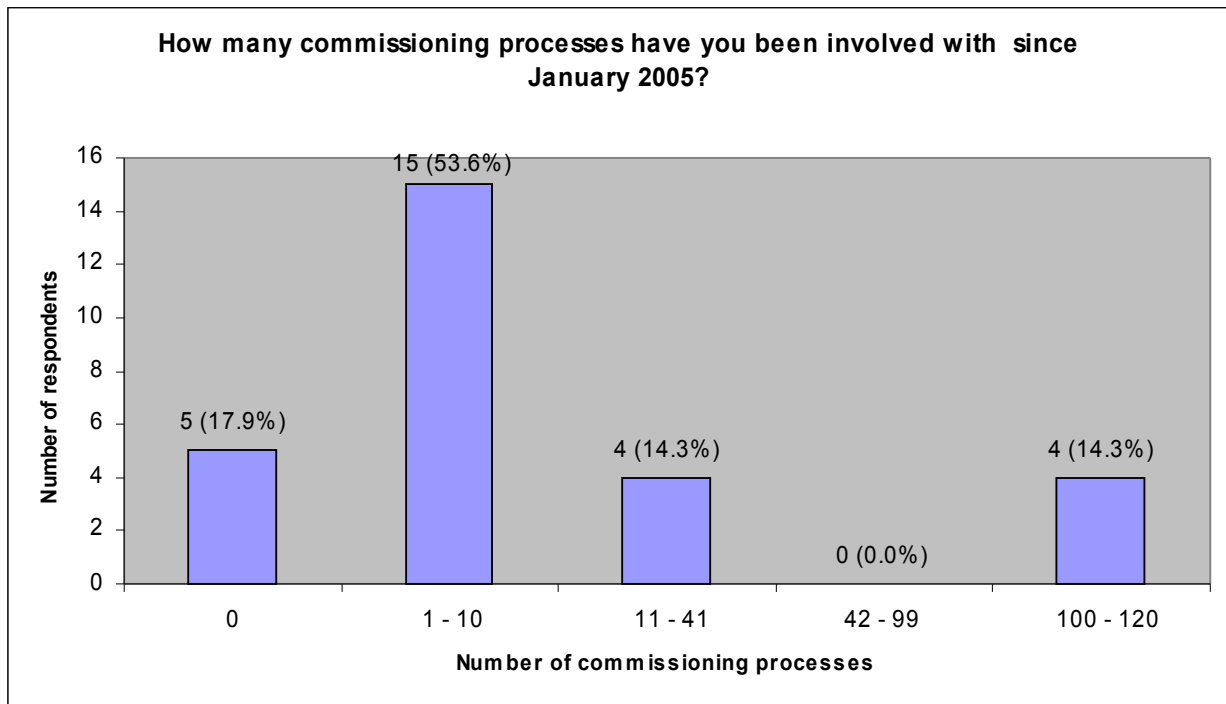
Respondents were asked to provide details of their location. This shows that the most common location (for almost a third of all respondents) was London.



Base = 43

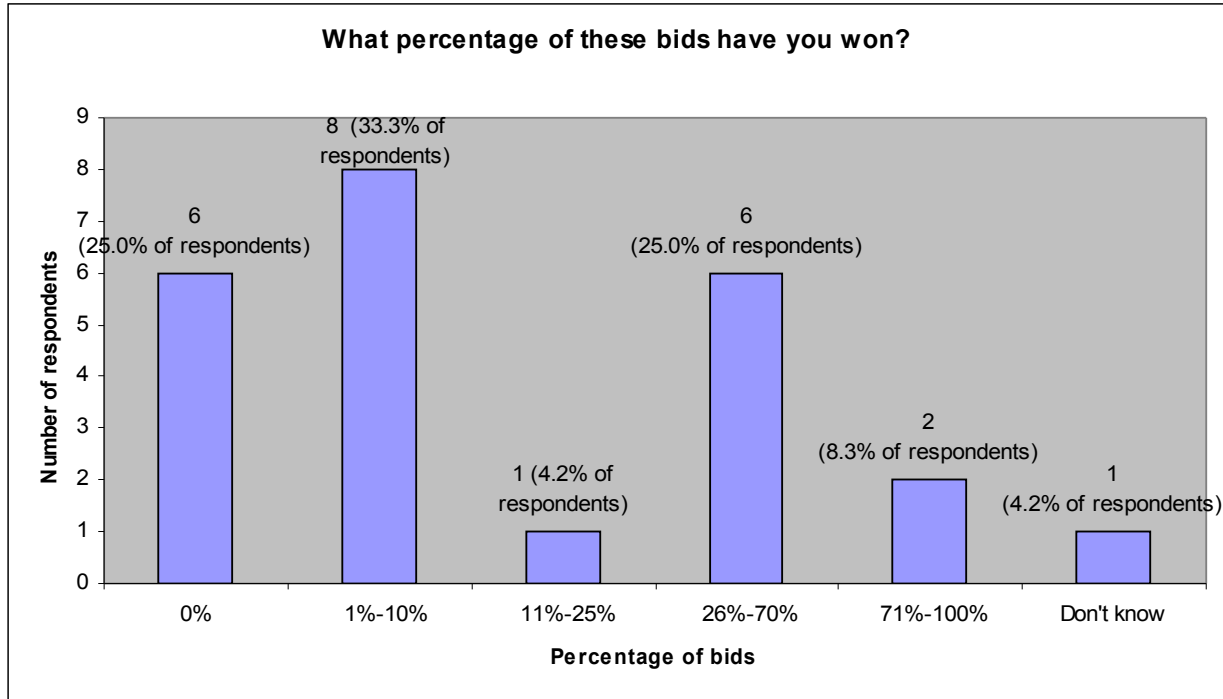
3.5 Respondents' commissioning experience

Respondents were asked to state the number of commissioning processes they had been involved with. Half of those who responded to this question (14 out of 28 respondents) had been involved in four or less since January 2005.



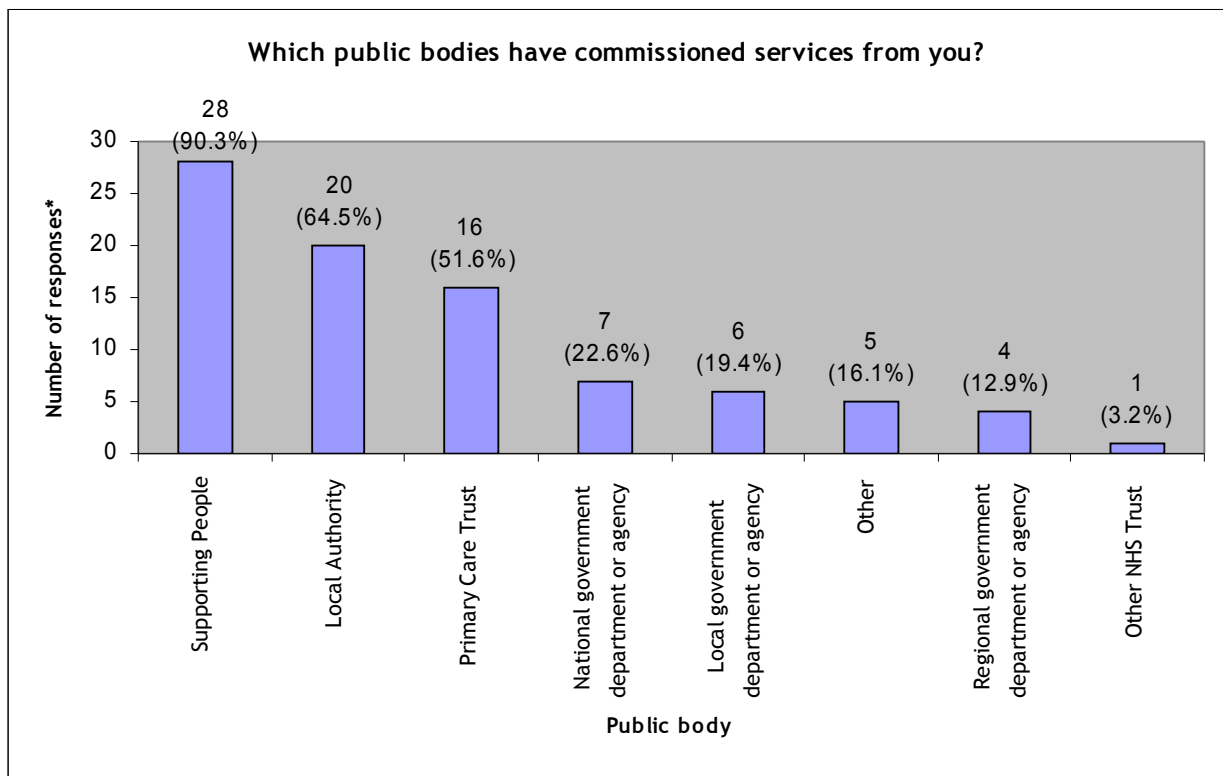
Base = 28

When asked about the proportion of bids they had won, a quarter of all respondents said they had not won any bids, though a similar number said they had won between 26 and 70 percent of their bids.



Base = 24

Lastly, respondents were asked who had commissioned services from them. This was most commonly Supporting People, the local authority and the PCT.



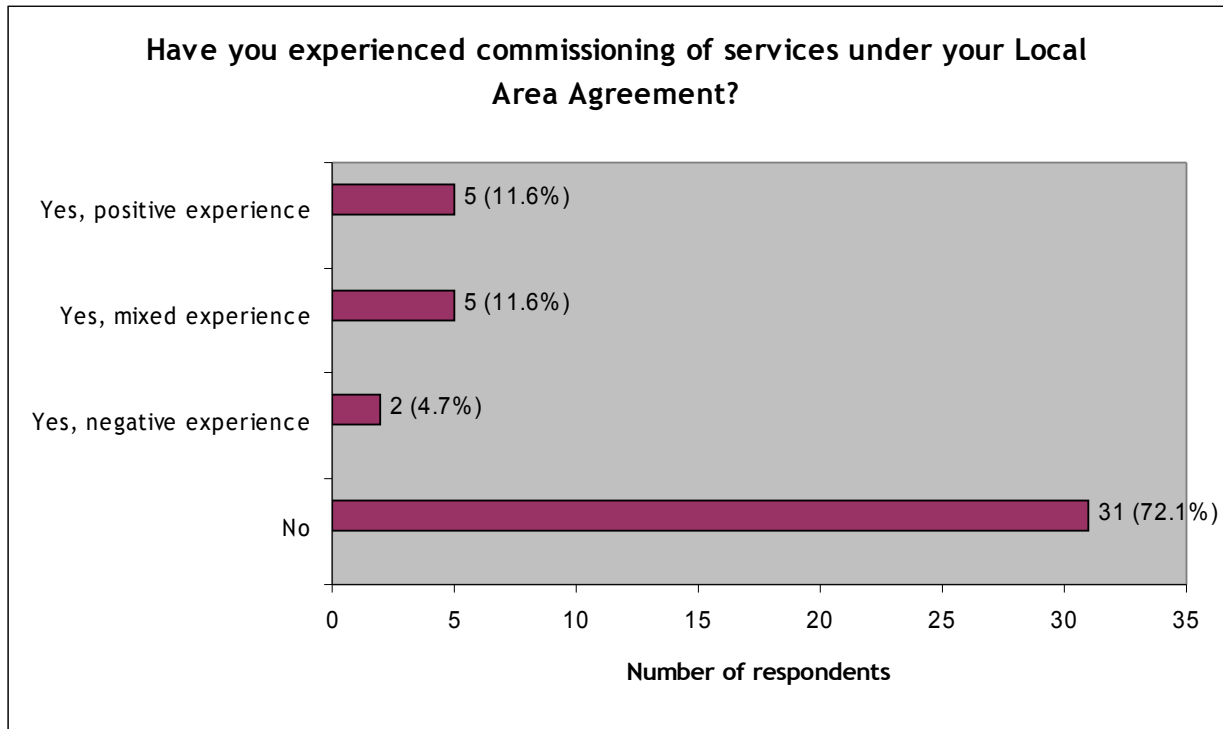
* Respondents can tick more than one public body so totals add to more than 31 (100%)

Base = 31

PART B - SURVEY FINDINGS

4. Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

When respondents were asked about their experience of commissioning services under LAAs, the majority said they had no experience.



Base = 43

Of those that did have experience, the national indicators that they linked their work to were most commonly National Indicator #141 (vulnerable people achieving independent living) and #142 (vulnerable people maintaining independent living), though a range of other indicators were also mentioned, including reducing re-offending, and reducing drug and alcohol misuse.

What the respondents said....

“I have been involved in the early stages of the ... LAA but no real impact as yet on services.”

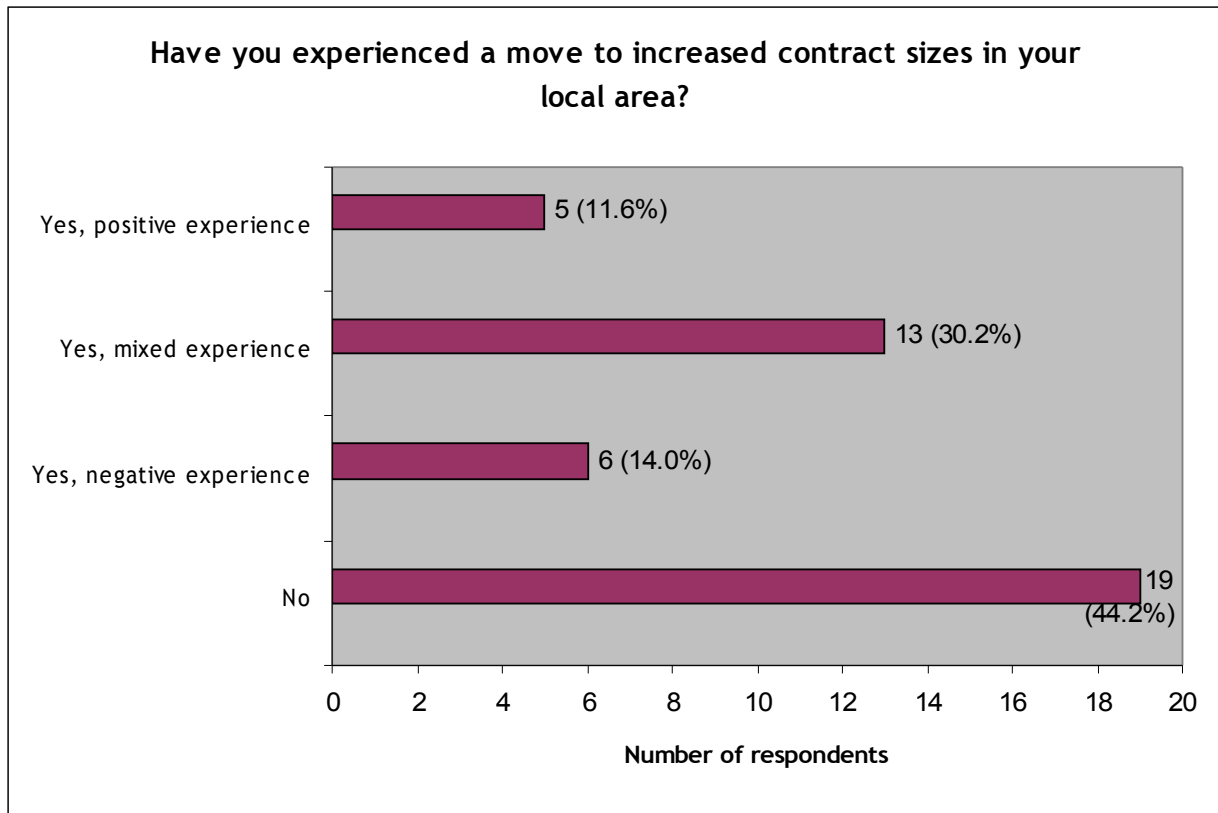
“A recent commissioning exercise ... for social inclusion activities was made easier as we could demonstrate the impact of our work against a range of LAA outcomes, rather than the narrower group included in SP outcomes.”

“... any events set up by our local council to promote LAAs have been heavily directed to current Council depts/agencies with little or no invitation to the VCS sector.”

“No involvement of sector in the design or planning of the specification - as a result, a poorly specified tender document which was also contradictory in parts. Final tender specified a floating support model ... and this model will likely fail very quickly.”

5. Contract sizes

More than half the respondents (55.8%) had some experience of increased contract sizes in their local area. Experience was mixed between positive and negative.



Base = 43

What the respondents said....

“In some cases, tidying up the funding of many services with different legacy funding streams into single contracts has reduced administration and given more flexibility.”

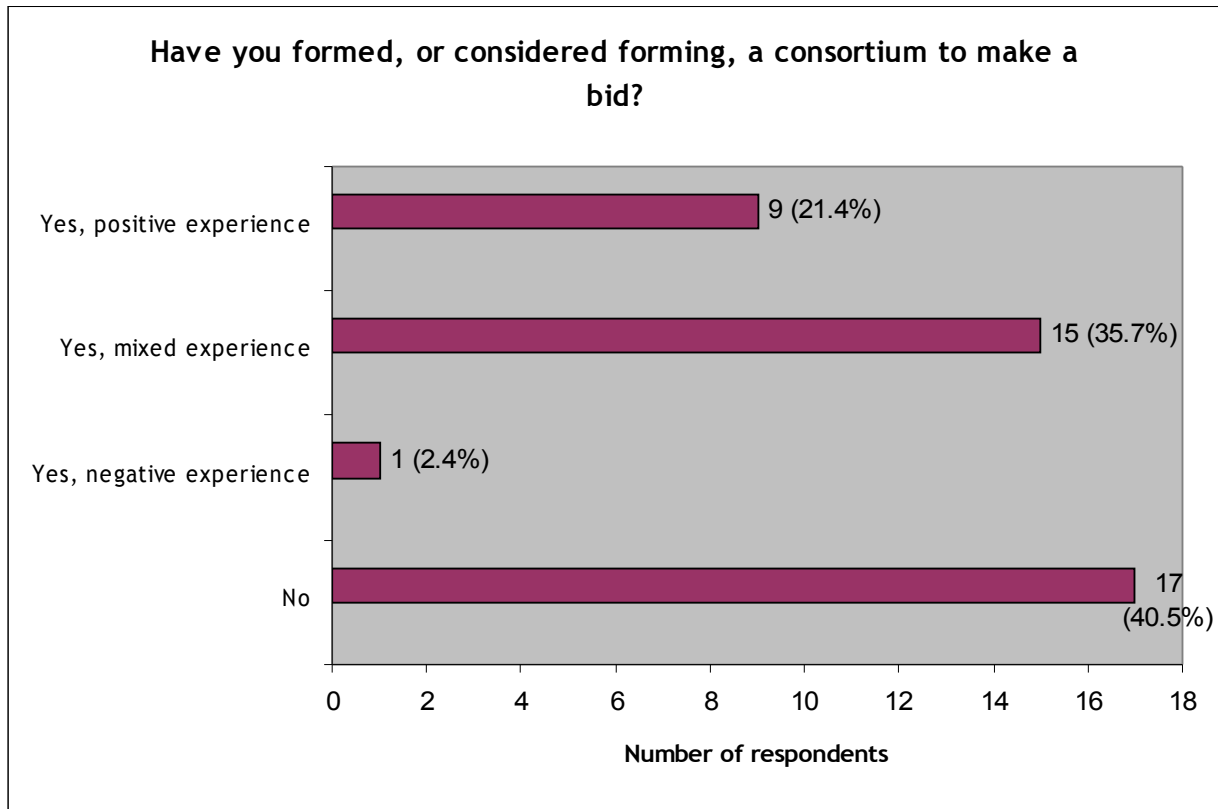
“... we have seen a gradual rationalisation of contracts which has seen several small providers drop out of funding.”

“Merging of lots of small SP contracts for Floating Support into large generic contracts often eliminates specialist support for young people.”

“Large contracts being tendered are going to large external organisations.”

6. Consortium bids

Just over 40% of respondents had no experience of consortium bids. Of those that did, only one person reported this as entirely negative. Overall, experience was either mixed, or entirely positive.



Base = 42

What the respondents said....

“The council has awarded a number of contracts to collaborative bids (consortia and partnerships).”

“The formation of the partnership or consortium to deliver services has been relatively good in terms of experience but...commissioners... expect far more joint working experience - they seem to ignore the expertise of each part of the consortium where there is no joint working prior to the bid. This attitude seems to be prevalent in a number of SP bids we have made over the last year.”

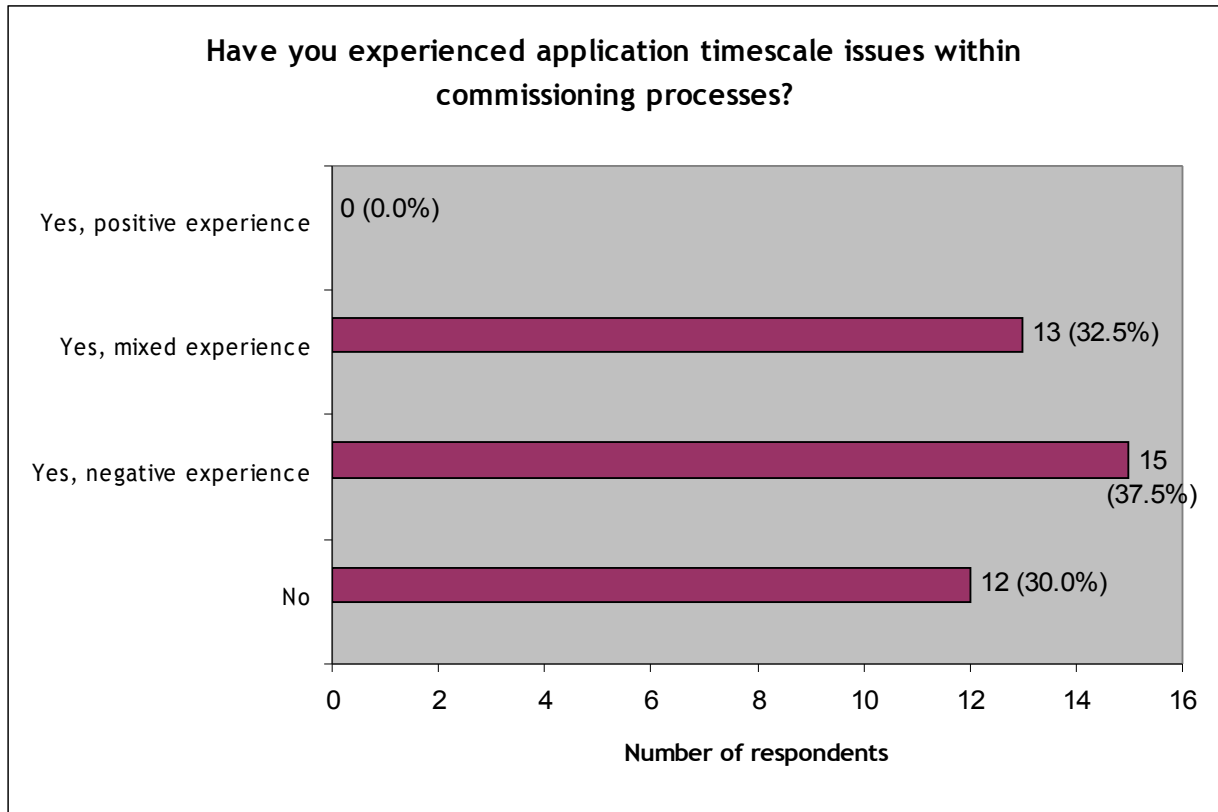
“Benefits of consortiums are bringing the strengths and expertise of different agencies together. But very time demanding and complicated administration, with potential to produce as much discord as harmony!”

“Consortium bids do not interest us as we perceive them as lacking clarity about who has the primary contractor responsibilities... though how the rewards for achieving outcomes are divided up is the crucial matter.”

“... the problem of actually knowing which ones to work with is problematic. Sharing ideas with potential competitors means potentially losing a competitive edge.”

7. Timescales

No one reported application timescale issues as entirely positive. Approximately one third saw the issues as negative, another third felt it was more mixed, and the other third had no experience.



Base = 40

What the respondents said...

“Usually there is an unrealistic deadline which is expanded at the last minute!”

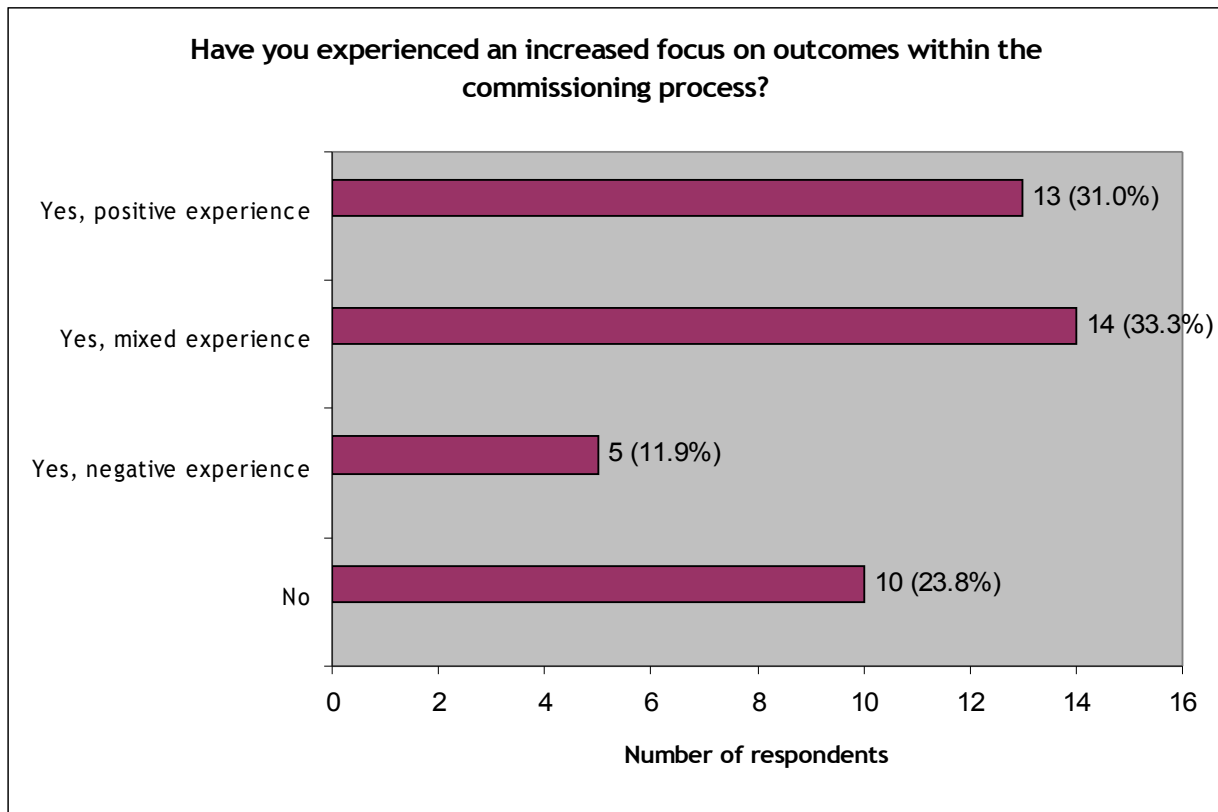
“... Often tenders come out across many areas in the autumn which cause us capacity issues as the LA gear up to commission for the next financial year.”

“Procurement timetables have been issued by both SP Teams we are in contact with and both have ended up very behind. This adds to the uncertainty for service users and providers when it becomes very unclear exactly when their services will be put out for tender.”

“The Supporting People commissioning process is at a standstill here, with providers still on interim contracts, and new services stalled at the bidding stage. This is due to lack of staff. In other areas, monies available to commission services have been held up in internal processes.”

8. Outcomes

Over three quarters of respondents (32) had experience of an increased focus on outcomes. Only five of these people stated that their experience had been entirely negative.



Base = 42

What the respondents said....

“Yes, we have received that message clearly from the local authority and welcome it.”

“This is entirely in keeping with our own principles of delivering an effective service.”

“Not an increased focus - it has been there a number of years. The "standard" questions at panel interviews seem to underplay outcomes in favour of process which is not always helpful.”

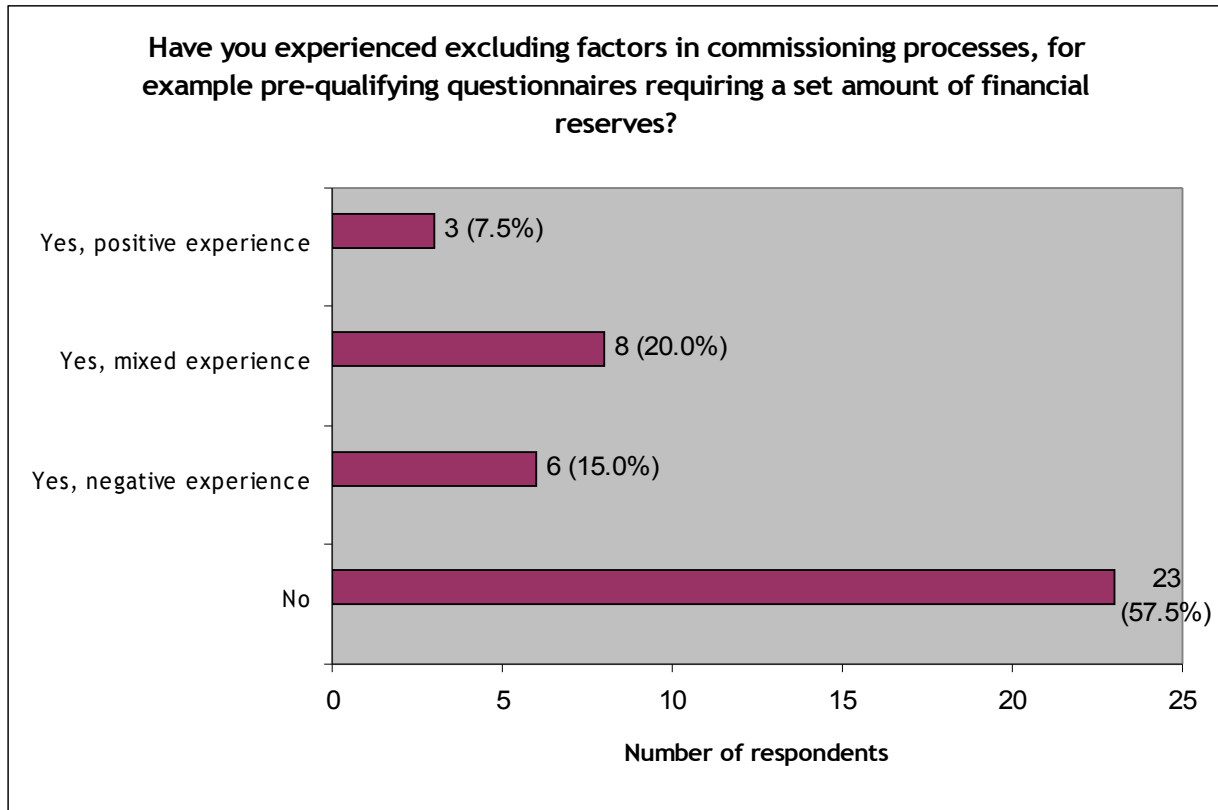
“Not sure whether the outcomes targets are realistic or stretch targets...”

“Outcomes set for SP can be too rigid to reflect the clients' actual progress. Outcomes for clients with alcohol problems seem to have been rolled over directly from the drugs field, which means some of them are inappropriate to the work carried out...”

“I appreciate that positive outcomes are necessary but this is often difficult particularly when working with people who are literally straight off the streets as we are. Sometimes the outcomes are quite unrealistic for us.”

9. Excluding factors

Just under half of all respondents had experienced excluding factors, of which only three had found this an entirely positive experience.



Base = 40

What the respondents said....

“... what we have found locally is that PQQ's [pre-qualifying questionnaires] are not being issued which we feel would be a useful filtering process... Commissioners seem to be apprehensive about issuing PQQ's for fear of excluding even the most inappropriate tenders.”

“It is reasonable for commissioners to assure themselves of financial viability of tenderers.”

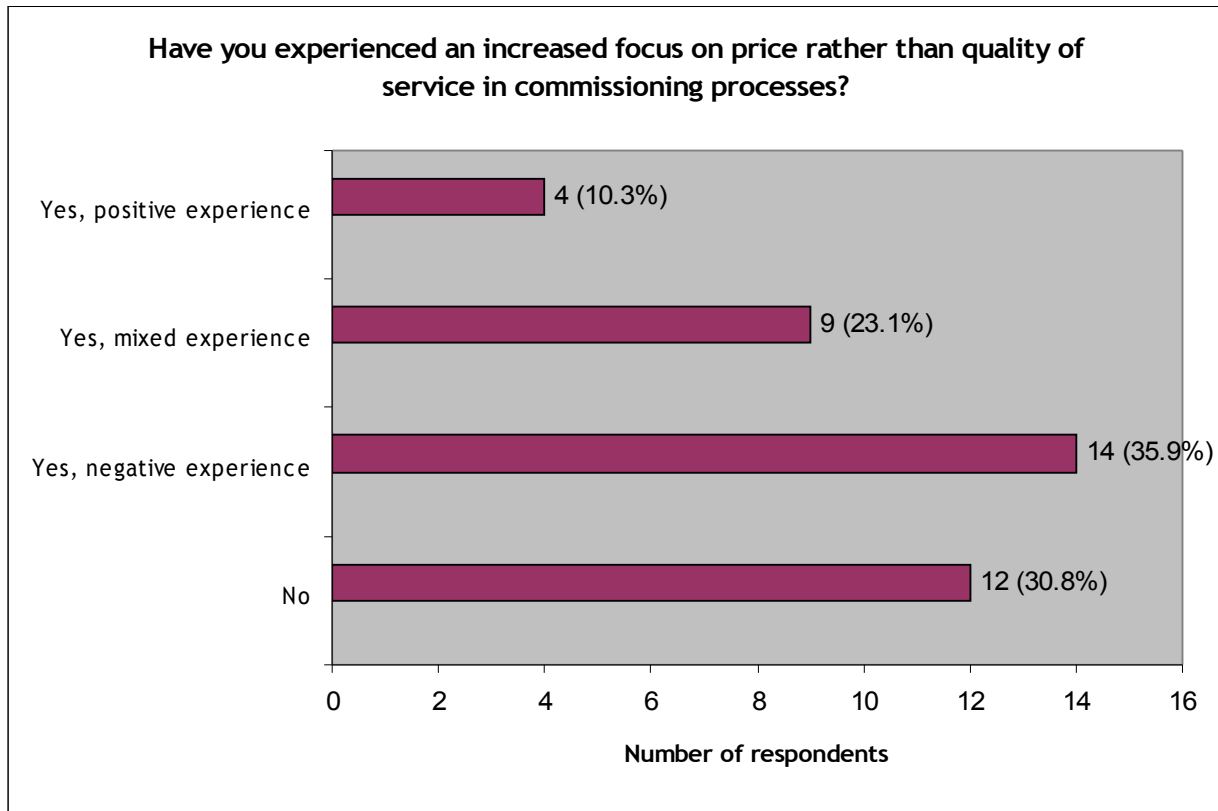
“We were once asked for audited management accounts at Month 10 which we could not provide and so were excluded following PQQ.”

“The local area has changed its mind regularly on the process of commissioning, and the part played by the PQQ. This led to an extended period when services were confused about what would be required, and we were frustrated that work done locally on Accreditation, or passing a Review process, would not count towards a PQQ, leading to a duplication of work required.”

“... requirements for numerous different QA [Quality Assurance] or accreditation schemes (such as ISO 9000) when we have IIP [Investors in People] and use our own internally developed and to our mind more relevant QA systems.”

10. Price versus quality

Just over two thirds of respondents had experienced an increased focus on price rather than quality of service. The majority of these viewed their experience as negative.



Base = 39

What the respondents said....

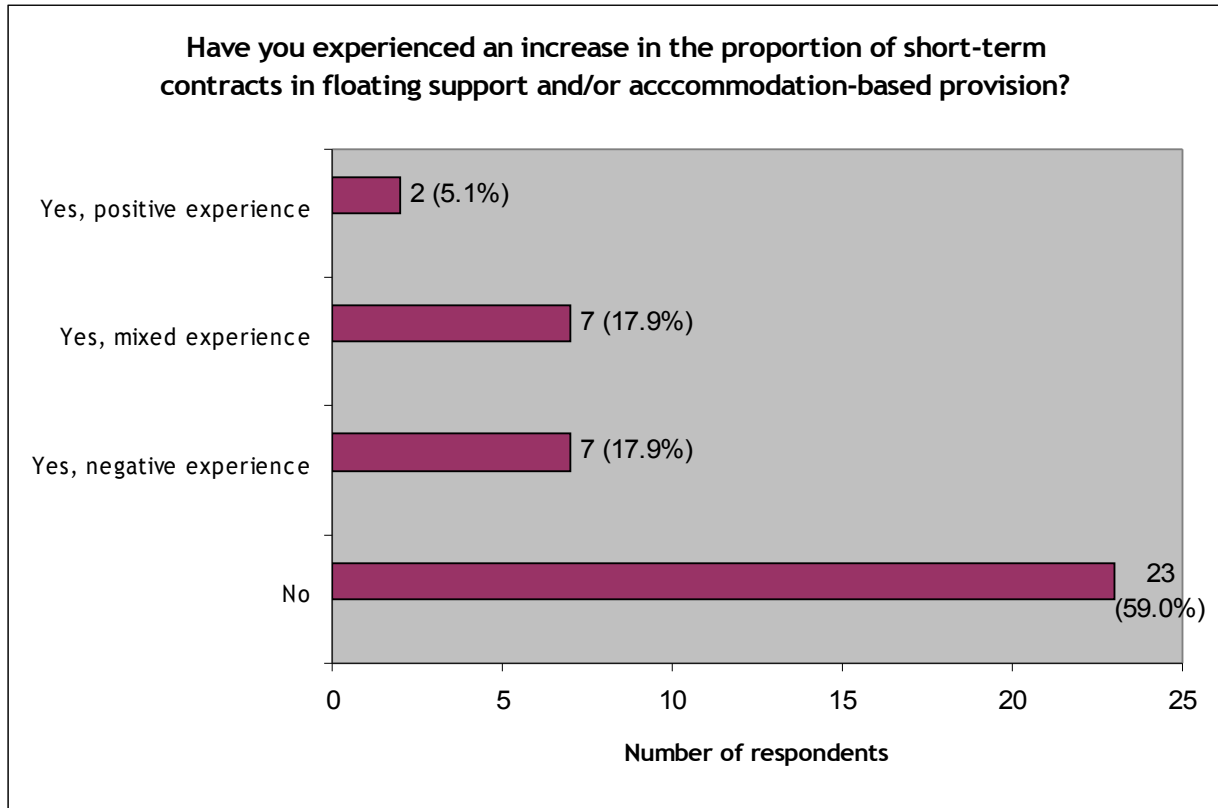
“...We are currently involved in another tender which is a re-tender of an existing service ... where a fixed tender price 12.5% less than our existing contract price is what is being offered.”

“Just tendered for a service in a neighbouring county which was very focused on price and wanted to negotiate on many levels of the price in spite of the fact that their specification suggested that certain costs would be absorbed by the local authority.”

“I have lost two tenders purely on price despite the commissioners specifically saying that our tenders were the best in terms of quality. The winning prices in both cases were definitely loss making.”

11. Short term contracts

Only 40% of respondents had experience of an increase in the proportion of short term contracts in floating support and/or accommodation-based services.



Base = 39

Twenty one respondents gave information about which services these contracts were in relation to. Six (28.6%) said it was in floating support, five (23.8%) said it was in accommodation-based services, and ten (47.6%) said it was in both.

What the respondents said....

“Mainly there seems to be a reluctance to commission longer term (3 years) - instead they offer 1 or 2 years with little certainty until late in the day (i.e. contract end date.)”

“Shorter term contracting ... due to uncertainty about priorities once LAA/ABG in place. Also one-off short-term pilots / enhancement of services to use underspends.”

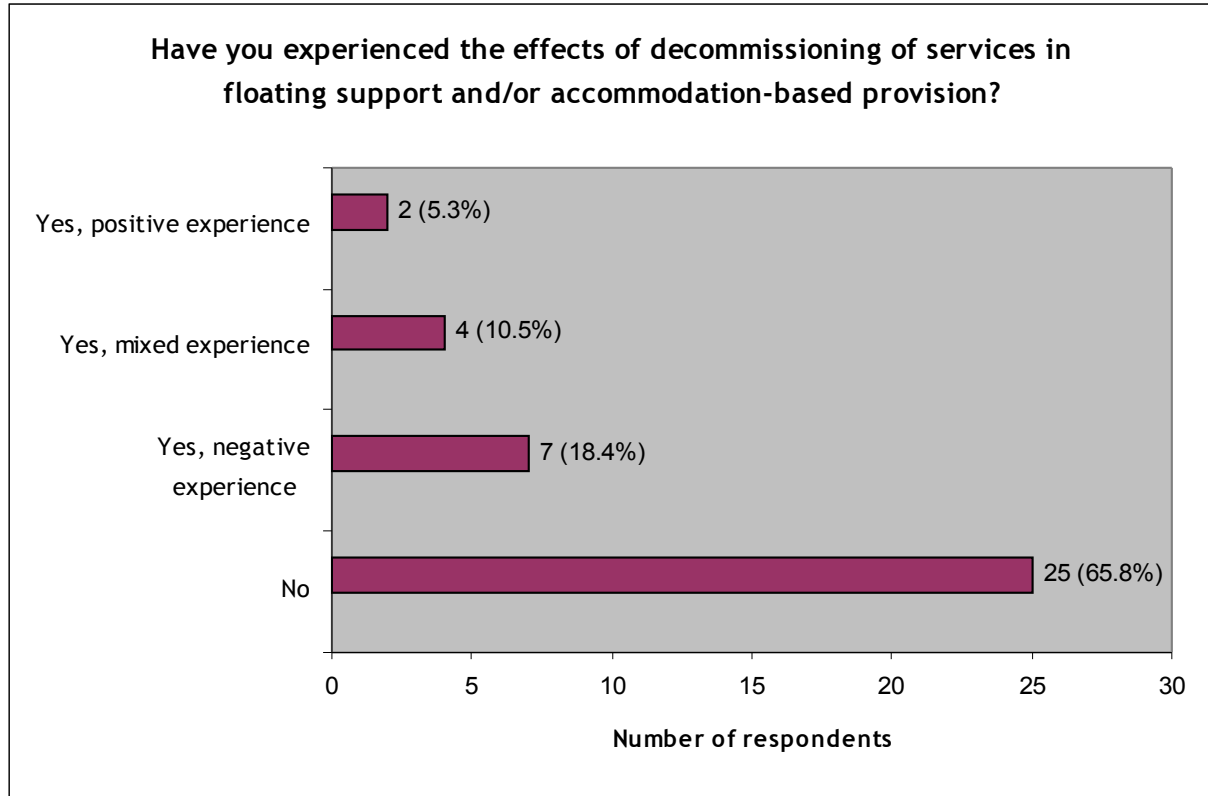
“On the whole, contracts are getting a bit longer - especially street work contracts and we would not like them to become too long, except under exceptional circumstances. Three years is good.”

“As mentioned, all SP services are still on interim contracts.”

“There is certainly an increased use on short term extensions and variations in contracts...”

12. Decommissioning

Just over one third of the sample had experienced the effects of decommissioning in floating support and/or accommodation-based services. More people found this experience negative, than the number who found it positive.



Base = 38

Seventeen respondents gave information about which services decommissioning was related to. Four (23.5%) said it was in floating support, five (29.4%) said it was in accommodation-based services, and eight (47.1%) said it was in both.

What the respondents said...

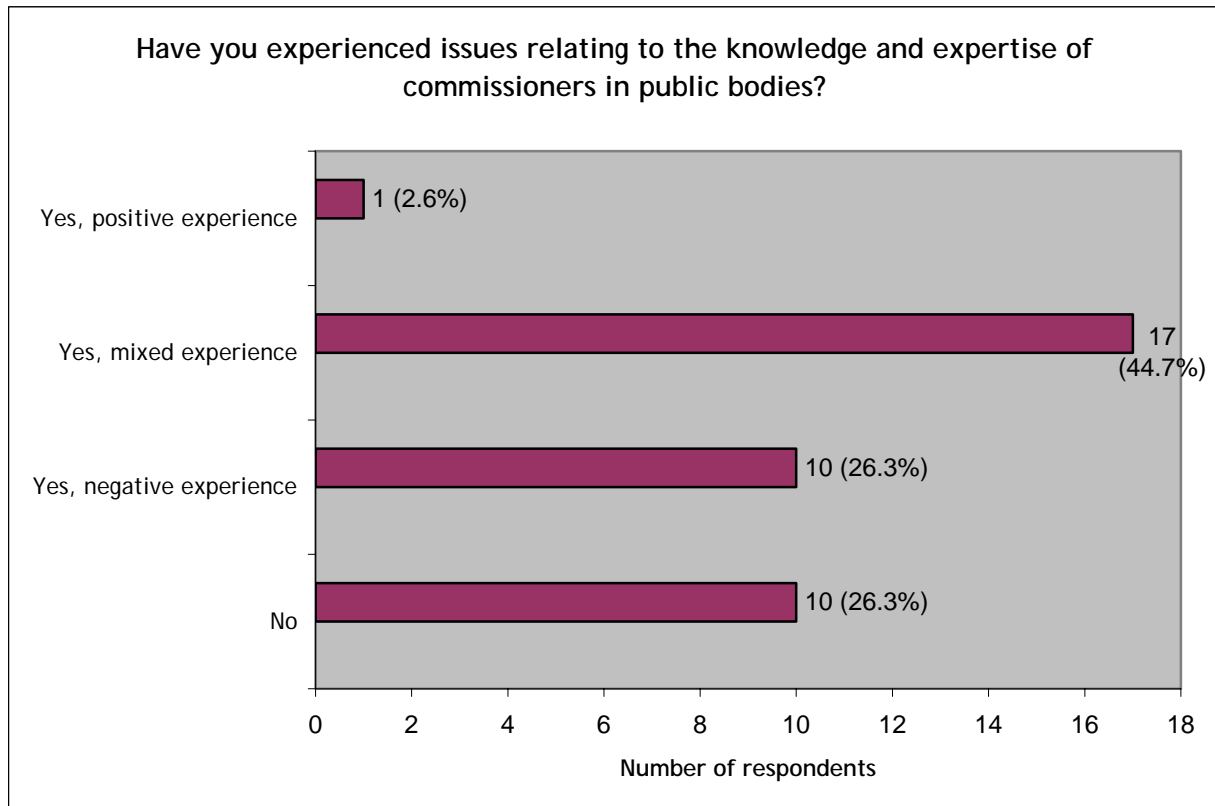
“...Providers are worried that when they have to declare services that have been decommissioned in future tenders this will count against them.”

“... funding for a scheme to befriend some of the most vulnerable socially excluded and isolated people in the community...was withdrawn without any negotiation with adult social care services. We challenged this decision ... and the ... council awarded us financial compensation ... Regrettably the grant was not restored.”

“...authorities still seem to expect full service to the final contract date despite staff retention problems in the wind down and the need to not refill support vacancies in the final months.”

13. Knowledge and expertise of commissioners

The majority of respondents had experienced issues with the knowledge and expertise of commissioners. The majority felt the experience was mixed. Only one person found it positive.



Base = 38

What the respondents said...

"Some have handed over the procurement process to their in-house teams who do not have knowledge of housing related support."

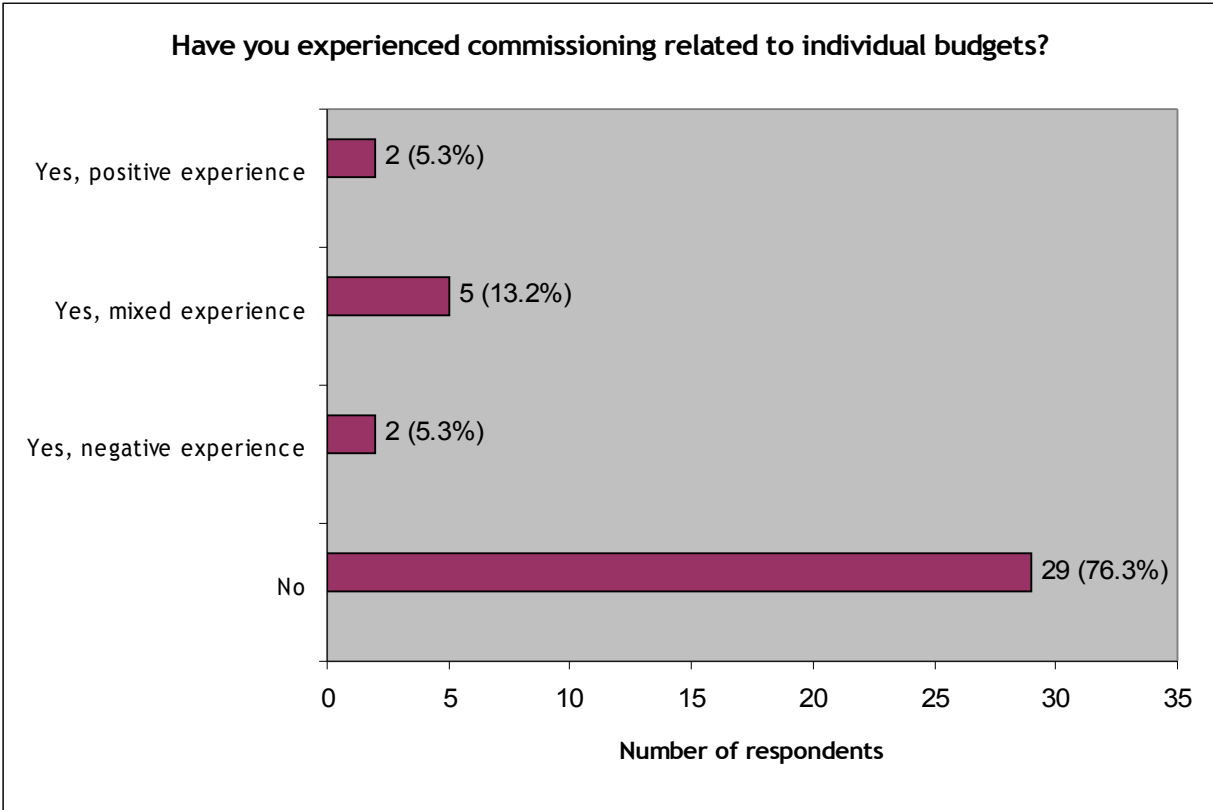
"...the commissioners I deal with... There is a distinct lack of knowledge of the sector and accordingly services are poorly specified. This is compounded by the fact that commissioners seem indisposed to involve the sector in the design and planning stages of the commissioning process... The usual position is that this can't be done because it would create a conflict of interest for those who may likely bid for a tender..."

"The SP Team has placed a high priority in developing relationships with the Providers, and this has resulted in our feeling that they have a good comprehension of, and respect for, the services we provide. I have found elsewhere that...sometimes to our benefit, where they rely on our experience as the basis for service configuration..."

"...The commissioner has little or no experience of any of the client groups... they said 'why don't we wake them [rough sleepers] up in the night and make it difficult to show them that we're not going to tolerate rough sleeping in the city'."

14. Individual budgets

Respondents were asked about the experience of individual budgets. Only a small proportion had any experience which was mainly mixed.



Base = 38

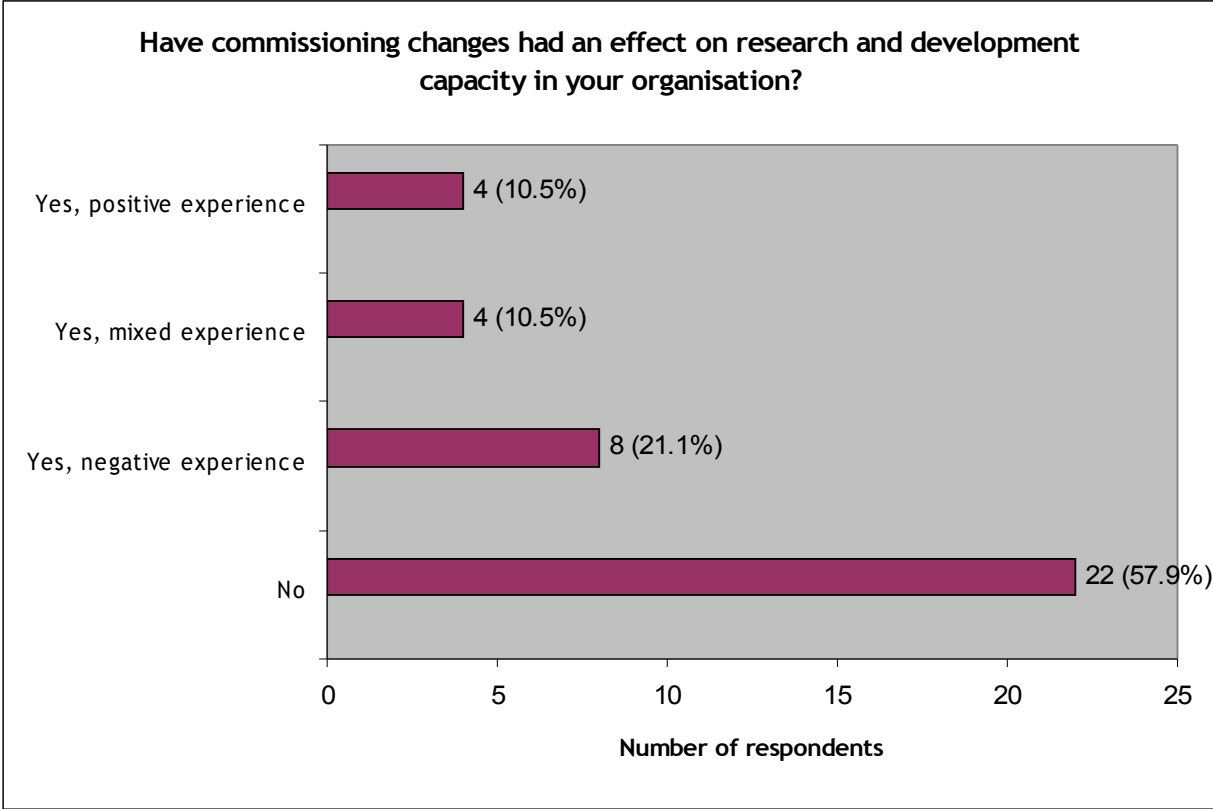
What the respondents said...

“Not yet but we will be tendering in this area shortly.”

“We have had some input about Individual Budgets, but our expectation is that they will not be applied to people with alcohol problems. If there is any change in this provision, it would have a disastrous impact on our service provision model.”

15. Research and development

The effects of commissioning changes in research and development capacity are mixed between positive and negative, though almost two thirds of respondents had no experience of this.



Base = 38

What the respondents said...

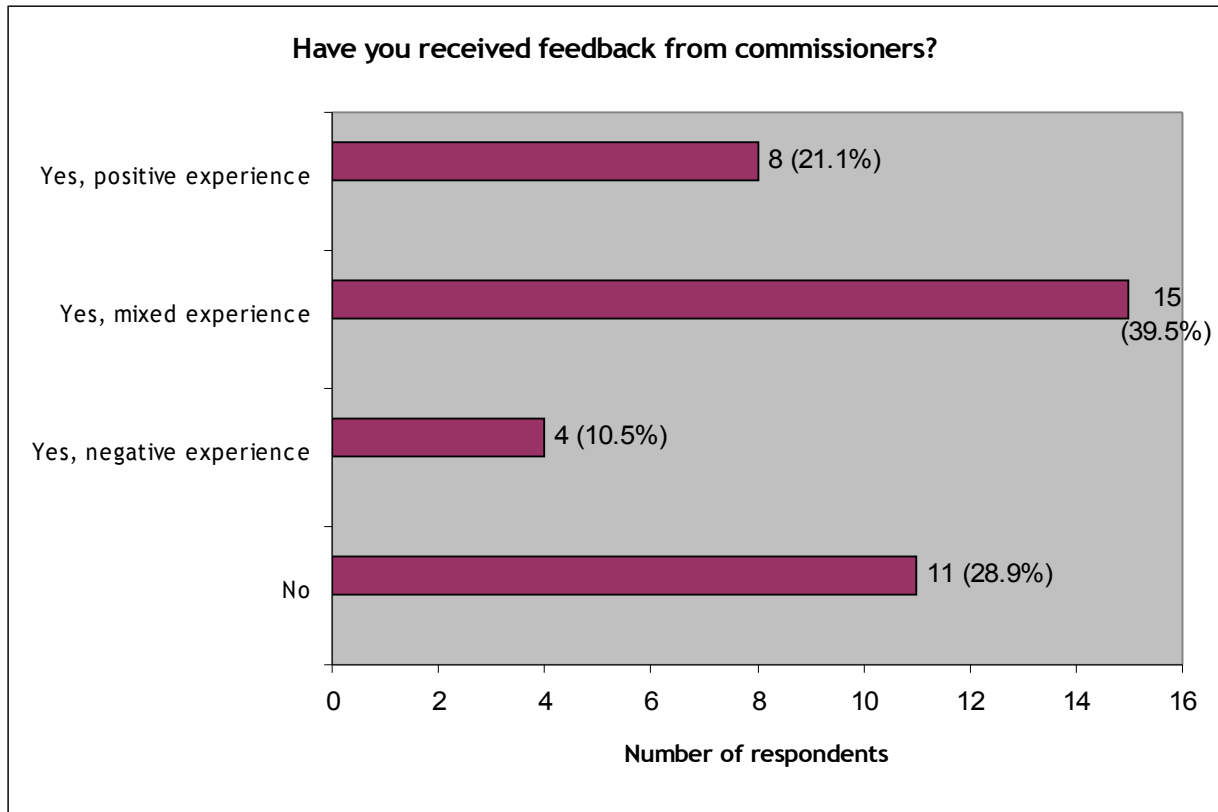
“We have a prudent growth strategy and as we have grown we have managed to develop our infrastructure accordingly. Pressure on central costs currently being exerted by commissioners may change this however.”

“Our Research and Development is not linked to commissioning.”

“Too many resources are now tied up in bureaucracy, including tendering and monitoring etc.”

16. Feedback from commissioners

Respondents were asked about their experience of feedback from commissioners. Experience was largely mixed, and one fifth of respondents said it was entirely positive.



Base = 38

What the respondents said....

“We have regular review meetings with SP team.”

“Some commissioners provide meaningful and useful feedback, most provide fairly standard and not very helpful feedback and a few provide useless feedback that tells you nothing and does not help in any way with future bids. Some commissioners seem to treat requests for feedback as potential challenges and so are very reticent to say anything other than standard responses...”

“Feedback is mixed - it can be very good ... very bland or impossible to get!”





Homeless Link is the national membership organisation for frontline homelessness agencies in England. Our mission is to be a catalyst that will help to bring an end to homelessness.

Our two goals are to:

- raise standards in the services that support homeless people and tackle homelessness
- influence the development of policy, strategy and investment at all levels of government.

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Frontline agencies in partnership