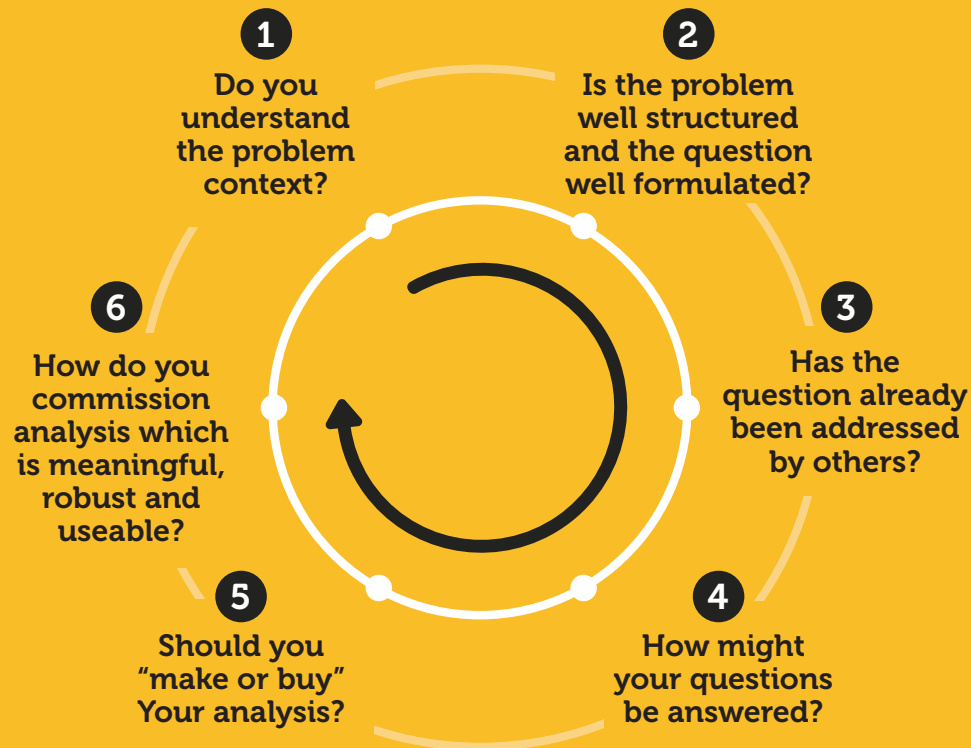


A guide to commissioning healthcare analysis for complex problems.



1 Do you understand the problem context?

Notes

'If I had an hour to tackle a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about the solution'

Einstein

Taking the time to understand the problem helps to ensure the analysis you commission is relevant and useable. It's helpful at this stage to identify your areas of uncertainty and translate this into a set of questions you think are important to informing your course of action, involving those likely to be involved in the decision or course of action. Focus on the problem you're trying to address rather than the analytical solution.

Don't be tempted to embark on the analysis before you've fully understood the context.

Prompts

What is the nature of the problem?
What are the key questions which need to be addressed?
What might the "answers" to your questions look like?
What are the consequences of obtaining no answer or a poor answer?
How would you manage if it were not possible to get a good answer?
Why is the answer required now?
How time critical is the work?
What is the minimum that would be required within these timescales?

NB Experience shows that communication chains can significantly distort the journey from originator to operative. Make sure that your answers to the above questions go back to the originator for confirmation.

Questions to ask before commissioning healthcare analysis.

2 Is the problem well structured and the question well formulated?

Notes

Given the pressures within health and social care, it can be tempting to seek a rapid response. However, if the question is important and the problem enduring, then a rapid response may well fail to account for the inherent complexities and ambiguities.

A considered response at a system level, which recognises local contextual factors and acknowledges various perspectives, will undoubtedly offer more meaningful insights than a rushed effort.

Prompts

Is your understanding of the problem shared by others?

How do you expect the analysis to make a difference to how you manage the problem?

What support, if any, do you need to articulate the problem and associated questions?

Is it clear how the problem has led to the questions and why? Are there other questions that might provide greater insight in addressing this problem?

How definitive or arguable might a good answer be?

Should the outputs be descriptive, explicative, evaluative, predictive or prescriptive?

Is it important that the results are seen as independent?

Is it important that the results are seen as authoritative?

3 Has the question already been addressed by others?

Notes

It's worth taking the time to check if anyone has already completed work in the same area to avoid any unwarranted replication or duplication. There are, unfortunately, some relatively expensive and high profile examples where commissioned work has addressed questions which were already thoroughly addressed in the published literature.

High quality analysis takes time and will routinely begin with a review of the literature to find out what has already been done and where the knowledge gaps are. It is important to do this systematically and objectively to avoid missing important evidence.

Prompts

Is this a new question or has it been asked before?

What work has been published on the subject?

How have others tried to address the question?

How have people in other fields outside healthcare addressed parallel problems?

Are the results of previous work credible and reliable? (How do you judge? Do you need advice?)

Has the context changed so much that the findings need to be re-tested?

To what extent can the results and learning from earlier work be applied to your context?

Is the originator aware of earlier, relevant work? Have you considered with them whether it may be sufficient for their purposes?

Questions to ask before commissioning healthcare analysis.

4 How might your questions be answered?

Notes

Important questions about complex systems will often require sophisticated choices about method and approach, and a practical balance between rigour and timeliness as well as real world considerations of budget and utility.

You may also need to choose between ideal methodology that requires new data collection, and other methods for which existing data will suffice.

There is real danger that poor method can produce misleading answers. And if the question is important enough, then misleading answers can risk decisions which cause harm.

Typically, complex problems will require a bespoke response, drawing on expert skills and knowledge. There can be a risk of over-simplifying problems, using generic tools which can mask underlying complexities.

Prompts

What analytical methods might be used to address the question?
Are there any existing tools that might help to address the problem?

To what extent does the analysis need to engage with stakeholders e.g. local clinicians?

Might the work be staged such that later work is specified based on the outcomes of earlier stages?

How specialised are the skills required to deploy these techniques?

What data might be available to support the analysis?

Is this data available? Is the data reliable? Is it held centrally or distributed?

What are the costs and IG implications (if any) of obtaining the data?

What assumptions or expert opinion will be required?

If the analysis depends on bespoke data, what are the implications for onward utility?

Do you need to understand the statistical uncertainty around the results?

Do you need to understand the assumptions on which the results are particularly sensitive?

5 Should you “make or buy” your analysis?

Notes

Expertise in complex analysis is fairly scarce. There is no general accreditation of ‘analytical expertise’ and there are many who claim it perhaps without justification.

Marshalling data for reporting is a very different thing to deploying analysis to understand cause and effect or to model potential futures. These are questions requiring expert skills and knowledge.

Undertaking analysis to evaluate an intervention or to inform policy or service change decisions should be viewed as an important act in the public interest. It is our collective duty to ensure that the interests of the wider NHS are properly served by undertaking this work in a robust and methodologically sound way..

Prompts

What levels of expertise or specialised skills are required?

Do you have the expertise in-house to conduct this work?

Do you have the capacity in-house to conduct this work in the timescales?

Do you have the expertise in-house to specify this work?

How will you identify potential suppliers that could address the question?

How will you assess their expertise and capabilities? Do you need help to do that?

Questions to ask before commissioning healthcare analysis.

6 How do you commission analysis which is meaningful, robust and useable?

Notes

Specifications vary widely in terms of expectations. A prescriptive approach, setting out very specific requirements in terms of method and process, limits the scope for innovation. It is more helpful to focus on the articulation of the problem and a description of the end outputs and outcomes required.

Your specification for the analysis should include criteria for assessing a supplier's credentials and experience. The criteria should also help you judge how the proposed approach will help you to progress your problem. (Customers have paid good money for poor analysis. It shouldn't be enough that someone just asserts they can do it - if the question being addressed is important then so too is seriously challenging the credentials of the potential supplier. What is 'good enough' will depend heavily on intended purpose and use).

If the question is important and if the work will have a high profile then you may wish to consider a peer review.

It is important not to underestimate the contribution you will need to make as a customer to ensure the quality of the analysis – for example, in providing data, obtaining necessary approvals and arranging stakeholder meetings. A dedicated role, acting as a single point of contact, can help to avoid potential delays.

Finally, and perhaps most important, analysis, however good, is useless if the organisation commissioning it doesn't have a clear process to act upon it. To get the best value from the analysis you commission, you will need to consider how the analysis will be acted on and taken forward from the outset, to ensure the relevant roles are engaged and outputs are managed through decision making processes and channels appropriately... always think through the 'end game'.

Prompts

Does your specification clearly describe the problem and associated questions you are seeking to address?

Are the specific output requirements, intended audiences and modes of intended dissemination clear?

Are you clear on how much you should stipulate in your specification re methodology /approach and where you are seeking innovation in response?

Have you included realistic timelines designed to achieve the quality of result necessary (and have you obtained advice on that if required)?

How can you ensure your procurement process identifies organisations that have the required skills?

What evidence will you require of skills and experience and proposed methodology?

Is the work of sufficient importance that peer review is required prior to publication or even of the proposed methodology prior to commencement?

Have you considered building in stop/go points?

How will you be advised on what constitutes a reasonable cost for such work?

How will you manage the engagement and ensure that all necessary inputs from your side are delivered to time?

How will you judge the quality of the output and has that been made clear to the bidder at the outset?

What will you do if the quality isn't as you would wish?

How will you ensure learning from the engagement and that knowledge is shared?

Is the problem a priority for the organisation and the request signed off by their leadership?

Will it be reported in to a decision making structure?

Do they have the capacity and capability to use the output?



This description has been developed by Strategy Unit and we ask that it only be shared with full acknowledgement.

It describes how we approach our task as providers of top flight analytical services.

We believe in it and we invite all our clients to measure us against it.

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