

Building trust in practice: Top tips for better relationships between commissioners and providers

Why this matters

Strong relationships between commissioners and adult social care providers underpin high-quality, person-centred care. The tips below reflect what commissioners and providers shared with us during our Commissioner Exchange roadshows and national roundtables. They highlight what helps with collaborative working day to day, and what can get in the way.

Many areas already have strong assets. This includes care associations, registered manager networks, provider forums, locality groups and peer networks. Where these exist, use them. Where they don't, bring together wider groups of providers, including the full breadth of the sector (home care, care homes, voluntary sector organisations, micro-providers). These conversations can offer insight, challenge, and shared problem-solving.

Above all, the message that came through from commissioners and providers is: we are all in this together, equal partners working towards the same goal.

Tip 1 - Put relationships at the centre, not just in processes

Culture and behaviours matter more than templates or forms. Strong relationships support transparency, shared leadership and confidence to challenge constructively. Providers should be involved not only at the start of a commissioning process, but throughout implementation, review and continuous improvement. Encouraging providers into strategic spaces, such as market shaping, leadership discussions and system-wide planning can strengthen understanding across the sector.



Good relationships don't solve every issue, but they do make problem solving feel like shared work rather than a battle.

Tip 2 - Engage early and involve people in shaping the work

Early involvement gives commissioners and providers a shared understanding of what is coming and creates space for more strategic conversations. Bringing people in early helps avoid last-minute surprises, builds shared ownership of decisions, and allows providers to offer insight that strengthens direction and planning on both sides.



Bring us in at the beginning and everything flows more naturally from there.

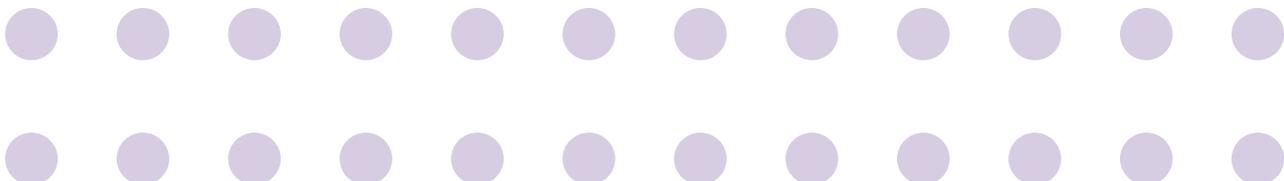
Tip 3 - Communicate regularly, clearly, and in all directions

Communication works best when it is frequent, clear, and accessible. Providers value quick updates in plain language and information shared through different routes (for example, short emails, summaries, face-to-face conversations, group sessions and 1:1 discussions). A named contact helps, but it's equally important that the whole commissioning team knows the context so providers can always speak to someone who understands their situation. Good communication should flow in all directions, including with people with lived experience.



Having regular engagement opportunities and open dialogue really does build trust.

A short update at the right time can save weeks of uncertainty.



Tip 4 - Be honest about constraints, and what can realistically change

Openness about pressures, limits and competing priorities builds trust. Providers told us they don't just need to know that there are constraints, they need to understand why. Sharing the rationale behind decisions supports respect, reduces frustration, and helps both sides focus on solutions.



Be honest about what influence providers have. Some things can change; others cannot.

If you're upfront about what's fixed and what isn't, we can work with that.

Tip 5 - Create shared understanding about roles and expectations

Commissioning structures and job titles vary across local authorities and ICBs, and providers can sometimes work across several areas. Clear descriptions of roles, or a simple glossary, help providers understand who does what and who can help. Mapping key partners and avoiding jargon or acronyms makes engagement easier, especially when priorities or responsibilities overlap.

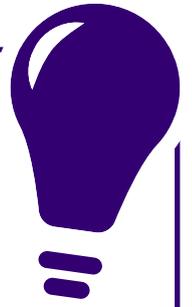


When we understand each other's role and limits, partnership becomes much simpler.



Tip 6 - Enable flexibility and shared innovation

Being bold, proactive and willing to think differently helps commissioners and providers find solutions that genuinely meet local need. Flexibility allows teams to harness local assets, collaborate across the breadth of the sector, and explore new ideas that go beyond traditional approaches.



When we're trusted to tailor things to local needs, the solutions are always stronger.

Tip 7 - Make engagement spaces accessible and inclusive

Different people contribute best in different spaces. Engagement should include multiple routes, such as face-to-face conversations, small groups, 1:1 sessions, named contacts, and quick-read summaries. Using plain language and avoiding acronyms helps ensure everyone can participate, regardless of time pressures or background.

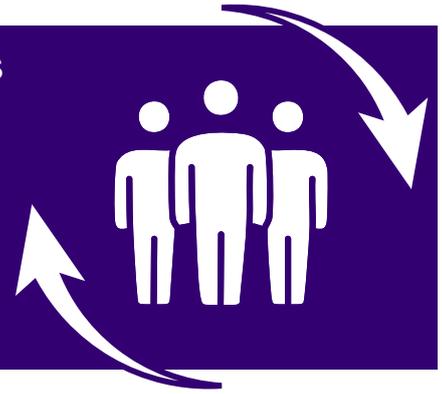


I'm far more open in smaller sessions, they feel safer and more productive.



Tip 8 - Build continuity and reduce 'reset' moments

Turnover in both commissioning and provider teams can unsettle relationships. Good handovers, clear introductions, and named contacts help maintain trust and momentum. Where available, use existing sector assets such as care associations and provider networks to share insight, strengthen relationships and support continuity.



A good handover makes the difference between starting again and moving forward.



We're all in the same boat - the more we work as partners, the better it gets for everyone

