

Draft Commissioning Strategy – Consultation Methodology and Responses

Background

The Council has been developing a Commissioning Strategy to set out how it will move to its new role as a commissioner rather than a direct deliverer of services. The draft Commissioning Strategy has evolved out of work undertaken with the Voluntary & Community Sector Assembly and is designed to support the council in achieving its vision that ‘as soon as possible, everything is as efficient as it can be focusing on the customer, prevention and partnership’.

The Consultation

Approval was given in February 2014 to commence a 12 week consultation on the draft strategy. An online survey was developed which asked a number of direct questions with multiple-choice answers and with the opportunity to add free-text comments to each answer. Two further ‘open’ questions were asked which required a free-text response.

In addition respondents were given the opportunity to submit a written response to the consultation in their own words.

The online survey questions were as follows:

Q1	Please state your role in relation to this Draft Commissioning Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer or Service User • Service Provider • VCS Organisation • Public Sector • Shropshire Council Member • Shropshire Council Staff • Other
Q2	Are the aims of this Draft Commissioning Strategy correct for this period of transformation in the way that public services are planned, commissioned and delivered?	Yes / In Part / No Comments
Q3	Do the commissioning principles set out here support the Council’s mission and aims of this strategy?	Yes / In Part / No Comments
Q4	Do the commissioning principles set out here support the achievement of better customer outcomes?	Yes / In Part / No Comments
Q5	Do the commissioning principles set out here support you in your role?	Yes / In Part / No Comments
Q6	Is it clear from the draft Commissioning Strategy how the Council will expect service providers to operate?	Yes / In Part / No Comments
Q7	How will this impact on the way that you will operate in future?	Comments
Q8	Will this enable you to maximise outcomes for your customers?	Yes / In Part / No Comments
Q9	Please comment on whether you feel this draft Commissioning Strategy overall helps to ensure that Shropshire Council will be an effective commissioner of services	Comments

The consultation paperwork was sent directly to key stakeholders and representative groups and was also raised in the Shropshire Council Members' Bulletin and circulated to Shropshire Council Directors and ip&e. Key stakeholders included:

- Voluntary & Community Sector Assembly
- Association of Local Councils
- Business Board
- Shropshire Clinical Commissioning Group
- West Mercia Police & Crime Commissioner's Office
- Shropshire Providers in Care
- Shropshire Providers Consortium
- COGS – Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin procurement group

In addition presentations were made to area meetings of the Association of Local Councils

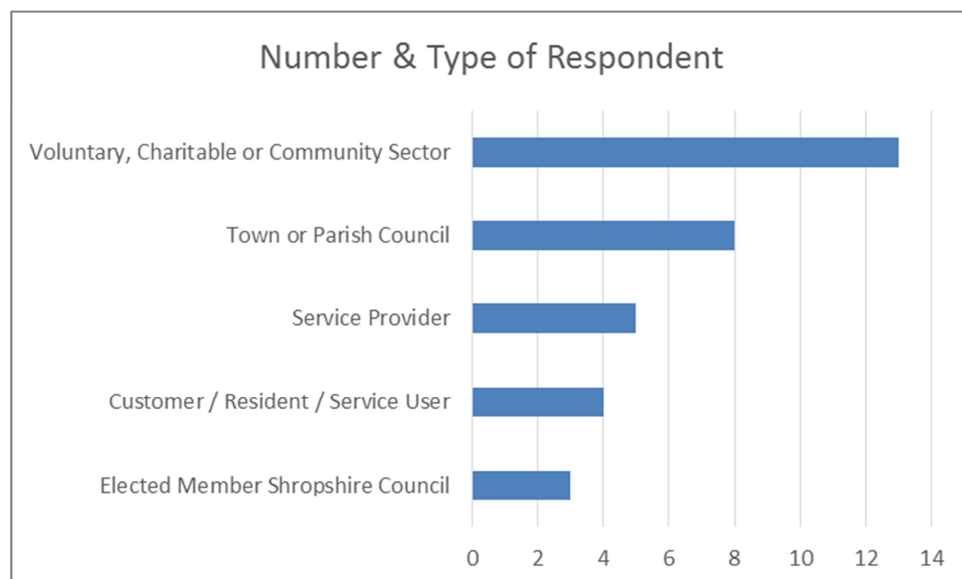
Consultation Response

In total the Council received 29 individual responses to the consultation. 19 responses were received online and 10 were written or e-mail responses. Four respondents described themselves as more than one respondent type, for example both service provider and VCS organisation. For the purposes of this analysis the total number of respondent types were counted.

Some responses were on behalf of a larger group of organisations. These were from:

- The Voluntary & Community Sector Assembly (VCSA) Board. The VCSA represents many voluntary and community sector organisations across Shropshire.
- Mayfair Community Centre – on behalf of Mayfair and the Community Transport Consortium
- Shropshire branch of the Federation of Small Businesses

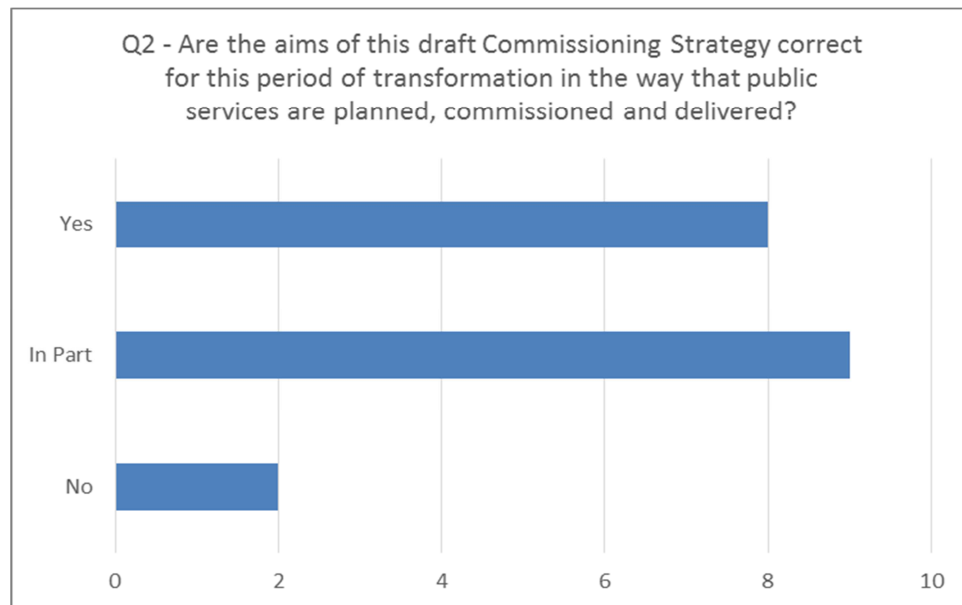
The largest number of responses was received from VCS organisations, followed by town or parish councils. The following chart illustrates respondent types by number:



Response to Specific Consultation Questions

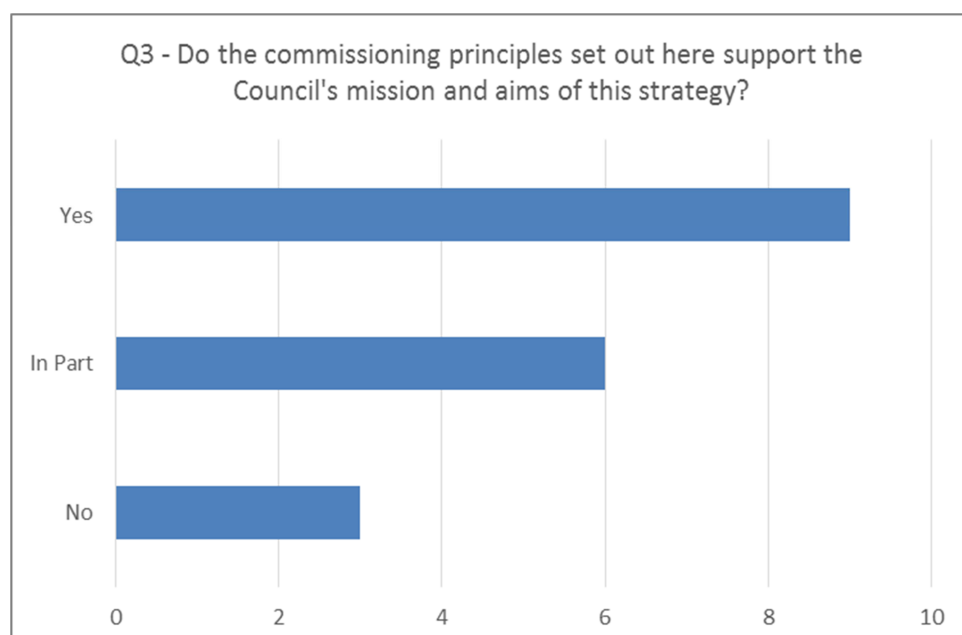
This next section details the responses to specific questions asked in the online survey and also reflects some of the themes raised in any additional comments.

Q2 - Are the aims of this draft Commissioning Strategy correct for this period of transformation in the way that public services are planned, commissioned and delivered?



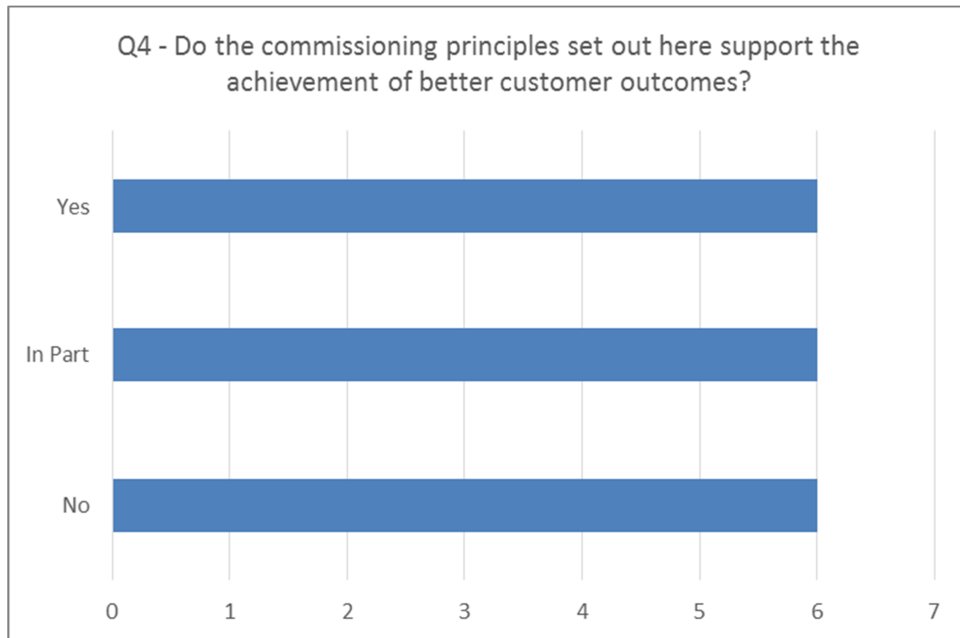
Additional comments picked up on the 'better, faster, cheaper and together with partners' aim – in particular expressing concern that 'cheaper' could mean either less staff capacity to deliver or driving down costs through applying buying power to large scale contracts, resulting in difficulty for smaller and local providers to compete for business.

Q3 - Do the commissioning principles set out here support the Council's mission and aims of this strategy?



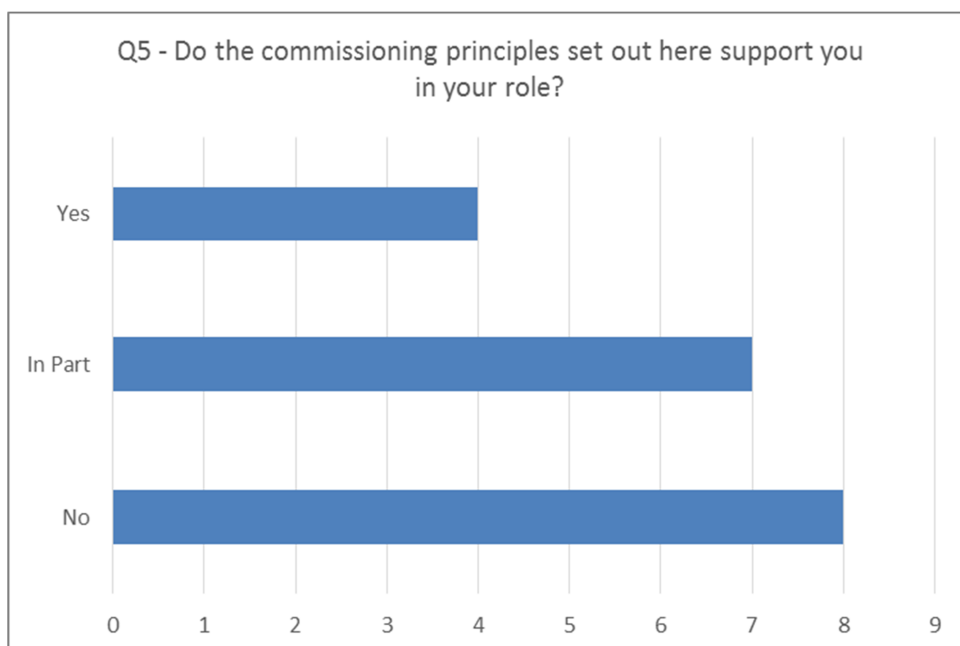
The majority of positive responses to this question came from VCS organisations. Additional comments that were provided questioned the Council's capacity and/or capability and reflected again on the 'better, faster, cheaper and together with partners' aim in the same way as Q2 above.

Q4 - Do the commissioning principles set out here support the achievement of better customer outcomes?



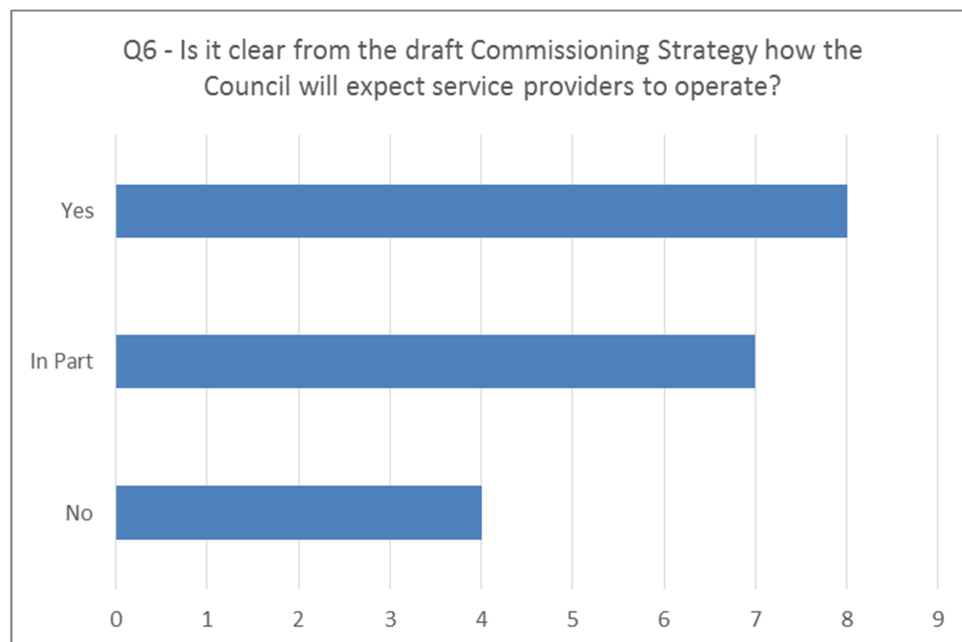
Again, the majority of positive responses to this question came from VCS organisations. Some respondents were not convinced that the transformation towards being a commissioning council as opposed to direct delivery would be beneficial.

Q5 - Do the commissioning principles set out here support you in your role?



Respondents who replied 'No' to this question are fairly evenly spread in terms of their role. The Council will need to communicate clear and simple messages about what the Commissioning Strategy means for various stakeholders when rolling it out to colleagues, partners and stakeholders.

Q6 - Is it clear from the draft Commissioning Strategy how the Council will expect service providers to operate?



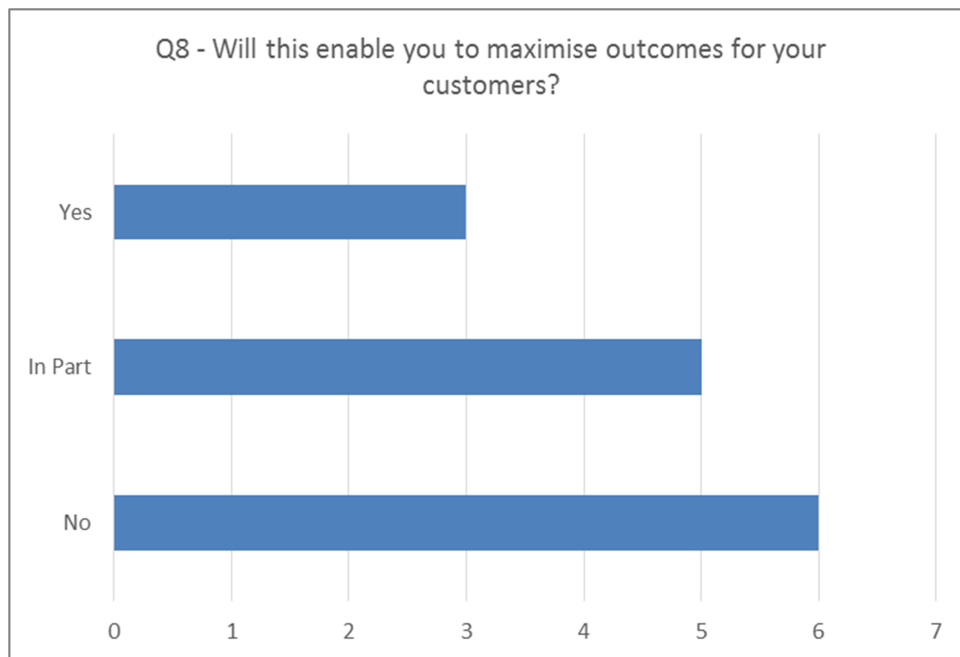
Additional comments reflected on the impact of financial savings on front-line services and also on the fact that a move to more commissioned services, subject to contracts, should allow for VCS organisations to build reserves where appropriate in order to allow for testing, innovation and flexibility.

Q7 – How will this impact on the way that you will operate in future?

This was a question that required a free-text response. Responses covered a range of subjects – most of the responses from and on behalf of VCS organisations reflected that they were already operating in the way envisaged in the strategy but also that key to making it work was a focus on partnership and collaboration. There was a desire expressed that evidence of the effectiveness of the strategy be shared with stakeholders. There was also concern expressed that without support from Shropshire Council town and parish councils would find it very difficult to operate.

Some written responses addressed this issue as well. Shropshire Housing Support Group for example represents service users of housing support services and supports a number of peer reviewers and would be keen to work with the Council on extending their remit to other areas of work. The response from the VCSA Board expressed a continued desire to work strategically with the Council around implementation of the Commissioning Strategy.

Q8 - Will this enable you to maximise outcomes for your customers?



Responses recognised the importance of delivering outcomes for customers. It is important that procurement / contractual requirements are structured in a way that maximises the opportunity to deliver outcomes. Concern was expressed that town / parish councils are already struggling to maintain outcomes for residents.

Q9 – Please comment on whether this draft Commissioning Strategy overall helps to ensure that Shropshire Council will be an effective commissioner of services.

This was a question that required a free-text response. A number of responses identified that the key to success “will be the organisation living the strategy” and that this approach needs to be embedded across all working in all departments in the Council. The strategy is seen as high-level principles but real success will depend on those who are delivering the strategy and the detailed guidance supporting it. Again, the point was made that mechanisms need to be in place to evaluate the effectiveness of commissioners which involves “providers, users and communities as well as the Council itself”.

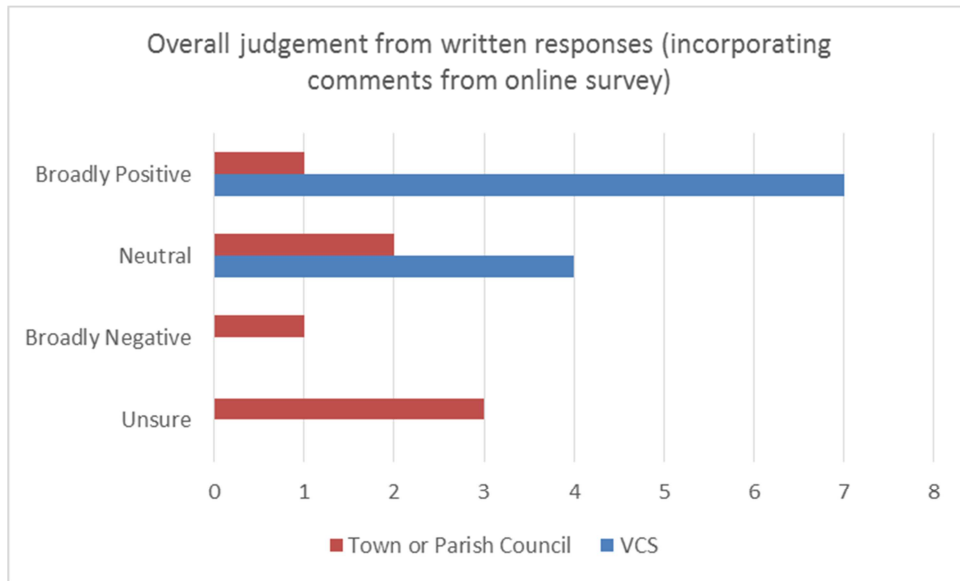
Responses from local councils identified concerns over the Council’s ability to deliver on the strategy, in particular questioning whether the right skills were available to be able to deliver an effective commissioning model. There was also concern that local decision-making and commissioning is not supported by sufficient resource and also that local capacity to deliver may not be available in all areas.

Other Themes and Written Responses

The analysis above has concentrated on the online responses in the main. This section looks at the key themes from the written responses and also incorporates issues raised in the ‘comments’ sections of the online questions. 10 written responses were received – 5 from VCSA organisations or representative groups and 5 from local councils in Shropshire.

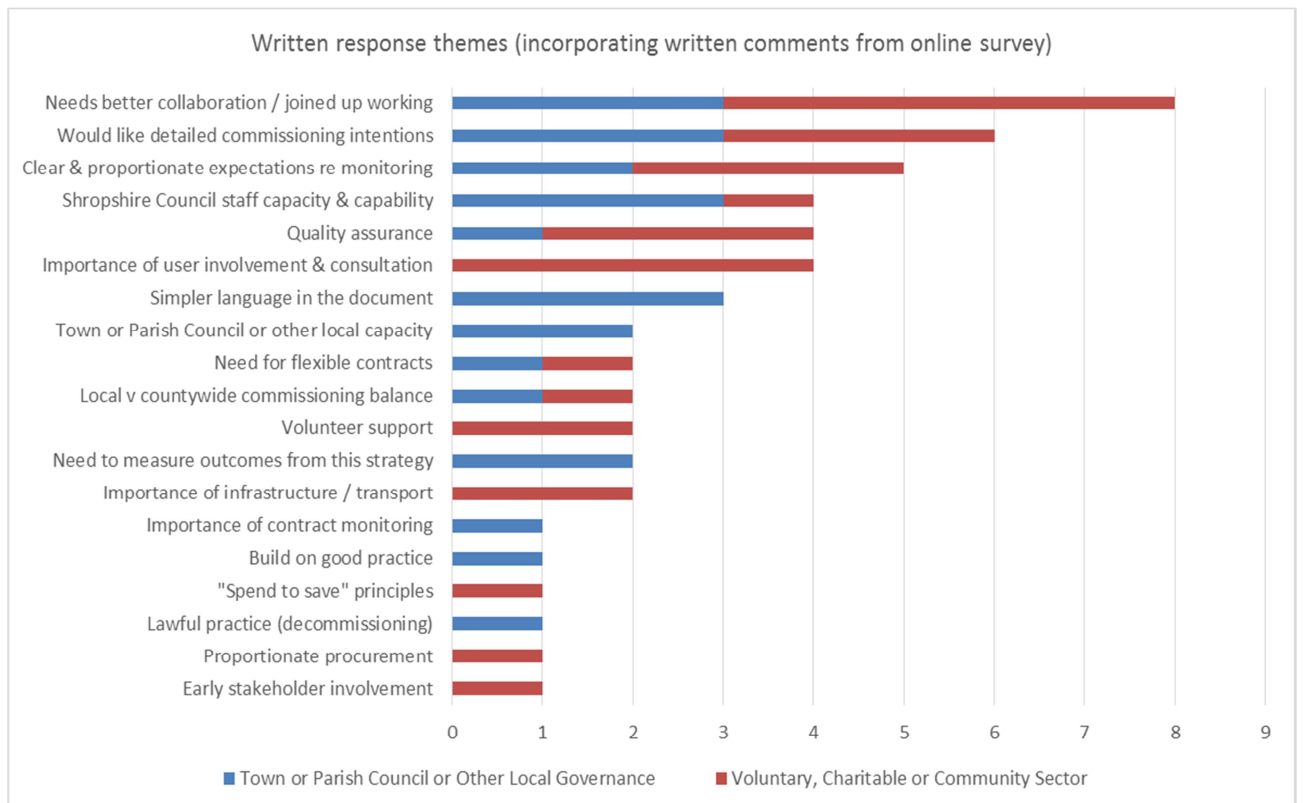
As these two types of respondent together formed a significant majority of responses overall (including online responses) an assessment has been made of the overall ‘direction’ of responses

from each sector. This will help to understand what further work needs to be done to help embed the Commissioning Strategy as the way in which the Council operates and how stakeholders can most effectively work with the Council to deliver on the strategy. Whilst this is a subjective analysis, it does show a difference in responses:



This chart identifies that in the main responses to the draft Commissioning Strategy from the VCS were broadly positive or neutral, whereas there was a clear spread of responses from local councils, including 1 broadly negative response.

Finally, the themes emerging from written responses and online comments can be identified as follows:



The main theme coming out from this is that collaboration or joined-up working is key to delivery of the strategy. In addition to being a pre-requisite for making this happen at a strategic level, this supports the requirement in the strategy for commissioned services to be partnering others and making best use of resources available.

Another key theme which came across was that, whilst the draft Commissioning Strategy articulates high-level aims and principles, the market would really like sight of more detailed commissioning intentions to help support their planning.

Contract monitoring requirements, quality assurance and capacity to monitor contracts effectively were identified as being important to get right in order to support effective commissioning. This is an area which will be picked up in the detailed supporting guidance which is being developed.

Capability and capacity to deliver was a theme which, where identified, came across very strongly. Some respondents found it difficult to equate reducing resources (financial and staffing) with an ability to deliver on the strategy and to ensure continuing improvement. This would suggest that a key requirement arising would be to communicate effectively what the strategy means for stakeholders and to build capacity and expertise where required in the market, communities and amongst staff.

Not specifically linked to this consultation, but articulated in the response from Age UK and referenced in the response from Shropshire Seniors, was a request that consideration be given to development of a specific strategy for older people, reflective of the increasing numbers and proportion of older people in Shropshire now and projected into the future.