How to write a robust business case for service development

Writng a business case, while time-consuming, is not complicated – but getting it wrong can be costly and frustrating. At a time when the healthcare system is trying to cut costs, nurses who want to improve or expand services need to be able to write business cases that stand out and convince decision makers. This article provides nurses with strategic recommendations and practical tips, stressing that a strong business proposal will need to be linked to local and national priorities, and articulated in the language of financial constraints. Nurses are often reluctant to write business cases but, with the right knowledge and support, they can successfully bring a service improvement idea into the strategic arena.

What is a business case?
A business case is a formal, structured written document submitted to decision makers for approval and/or funding of a service development initiative.

Key points
1. A business case is a formal document submitted to decision makers for approval and/or funding of a service development initiative.
2. A convincing business case must link the proposed service improvement to local, regional and national priorities and constraints.
3. The financial section of a business case will be analysed closely, so costs and benefits need to be made clear.
4. If nurses learn to articulate the needs of their services in the language of financial constraints, they have a good chance of securing funding.
5. The current move towards more integrated health and social care means this is a good time for nurses to try to influence decisions.

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Abstract
At a time of cuts and savings in the healthcare system, how can nurses convince decision makers to put money into improving or expanding services? A clear, concise and comprehensive business case is a good place to start. This article provides nurses with strategic recommendations and practical tips, stressing that a strong business proposal will need to be linked to local and national priorities, and articulated in the language of financial constraints. Nurses are often reluctant to write business cases but, with the right knowledge and support, they can successfully bring a service improvement idea into the strategic arena.

Citation
make savings by 2020/21. Clinical staff are expected to participate in the efforts to improve efficiency and reduce costs while maintaining high-quality services.

For nurses who are keen to be part of the current transformation of health and social care, this is a good time to try to influence the process, but they need to understand the national context and learn to articulate the needs of their services in the language of financial constraint. If they do so, there is a realistic possibility they will secure the resources needed to enhance services. There are a number of national documents, frameworks and priorities of which they need to be aware.

Better Care Fund
The Care Act (2014) provided a legal framework for the allocation of money from the Better Care Fund, which organisations can access to promote the integration of health and social care. The Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government (2016) have identified the national conditions that bodies responsible for Better Care Fund plans are expected to fulfil in 2016/17.

Sustainability and transformation plans
Sustainability and transformation plans (STPs) were announced in NHS planning guidance at the end of 2015. NHS organisations are now required to develop five-year plans to determine the key priorities for their geographical areas and identify how services are going to be delivered in an integrated way across health and social care (Bit.ly/KingsFundSTPsExplained).

There is a push towards strengthening primary and community services, as well as encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their health. From April 2017, STPs will be the only way to secure additional NHS funding, with the best plans receiving funding quickly.

The King’s Fund has assessed STPs (Ham et al, 2017) and concluded that:

● They offer the best hope for the NHS and its partners to sustain services and transform the delivery of health and social care;
● They are wide-reaching and propose changes in several areas, from prevention to acute and specialised services;
● A high priority for many STPs is to redesign services in the community to reduce demand for in-hospital care;
● Proposals to reconfigure hospitals could improve quality but need to be scrutinised and considered on their own merits;

Discussion

Table 1. Key components of a business case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>An overarching statement outlining the aim of the project and summarising the business case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brings together all the key areas for discussion and approval</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Useful for decision makers, as they may not read the whole document when first presented with it</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can influence whether the business case is approved</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is often written last</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proposal</td>
<td>Usually one or two sentences summing up the project</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May be used as an overarching statement at the start of the executive summary. For example, the proposal in a British Heart Foundation (2015) business case was: “to provide evidence for an integrated care approach to support people living with heart failure in the community from diagnosis to end of life”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>States what the business case is about</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Often includes background information and a description of the challenges driving the change</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May include sub-sections, such as:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current service and shortfalls – an honest appraisal of what is happening and how targets are not being met</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Demographic information – the population the project will serve</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feedback from patients and/or audit of their experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Objectives – what you are planning to achieve</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Outcomes – how the project will make a difference to patient care and fit in with wider strategic priorities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assumptions – you may not have all the data you need (for example, about savings, or numbers of people who will be seen), but you can make assumptions as long as you make this clear</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constraints – for example, restrictions of the service in terms of its geographical referral area, ability to recruit specialist staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Details and options</td>
<td>This goes into the detail of the proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If there is more than one, all options should be detailed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May include sub-sections, such as:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits – be clear and factual about the benefits and give examples of similar projects that have been successful</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Risks – risks are not necessarily a bad thing and can be mitigated, or there may even be a solution</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Measurable success criteria – how will success be measured once the project has been implemented?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Timescale – never underestimate how long it takes to get things done, but don’t be vague; be realistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial considerations</td>
<td>Pay and non-pay costs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Income the project will generate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding sources</td>
</tr>
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<td>Expected savings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial comparison with alternative services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations and conclusion</td>
<td>What is the preferred option (if there is more than one)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If the proposal is accepted, what are the next steps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommendations should be measurable and state clearly who is responsible for implementing the project</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Further detail about the preferred option and how progress will be evaluated may be presented here, or in a later document once approval has been granted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>If abbreviations and/or technical or medical terminology cannot be avoided, use a glossary to explain them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nursing Practice

Discussion

- Proposals to reduce capacity in hospitals will only be credible if there are robust plans to provide alternatives in the community;
- Cuts in social care and public health, as well as the lack of earmarked funds to support transformation, will affect the ability of NHS organisations and their partners to implement STPs.

In its assessment, The King’s Fund points out that there is widespread criticism, anger and anxiety in the face of these latest proposals, which appear to be reinventing the wheel or overcomplicating a system that is already suffering hardship (Ham et al, 2017).

NHS England mandate

The government published its mandate to NHS England (NHSE) in January 2016 (DH, 2016a). This set out the objectives, budget and how NHSE’s performance would be measured for the current financial year. On 31 March 2016, NHSE published the NHS outcomes framework and indicators for 2016/2017 (DH, 2016b), which set the priorities for the coming year. The key themes were improving health, transforming care, controlling costs and enabling change.

The DH (2016a; 2016b) set out indicators and improvement areas to which NHSE would be held to account, which included:
- Preventing people from dying early;
- Enhancing the quality of life for people with long-term conditions;
- Helping people to recover from episodes of ill health or injury;
- Ensuring people have positive experiences of care;
- Treating and caring for people in a safe environment and protecting them from avoidable harm.

Key components of a business case

The key components of a business case are described in Table 1. It is likely that your organisation already has a business case template; alternatively, examples can be sourced online. Your organisation may also have a template for risk assessment, which will help you identify risks; these may become apparent as you scope the project.

Before you start writing, remember to find out what your local policy is in terms of:
- Processes to follow;
- People to consult;
- Authorisations to be gained.

This will help avoid disappointment if your bid is not well received.

Nurses who want to get involved in writing a business case need an in-depth knowledge of the scope, feasibility and issues of the proposal. This will involve plenty of discussions with stakeholders. It is important to include stakeholders, patients and line managers in any initial discussions and brainstorm exercises. Qualitative and quantitative feedback from patients can give a strong sense of how services work and why gaps in services are a cause of concern.

Many charities aim to support specialist nursing roles and are likely to be able to provide national data, as well as possible funding sources, to support a bid. For example, the British Heart Foundation (2015) has published evidence of the success of the role of cardiac nurse specialists in the community. Nurses considering writing a business case can benefit from seeking advice from charities in their specialist area.

The five-case model

To help public sector organisations bid for funds, HM Treasury has devised the ‘five-case model’ (HM Treasury, 2015). This requires business cases for new initiatives to contain evidence that:
- The intervention is supported by a compelling case for change that fits with other parts of the organisation and the wider public sector – the ‘strategic case’;
- The intervention represents best value for public money – the ‘economic case’;
- The proposed deal is attractive to the marketplace, can be procured and is commercially viable – the ‘commercial case’;
- The proposed spending is affordable – the ‘financial case’;
- What is required from all parties is achievable – the ‘management case’.

Financial considerations

In the current economic climate, nurses are expected to streamline their work to make savings. However, they are not traditionally taught how to be financially astute, and often lack confidence in the area of service development. By developing the confidence needed to deal with financial issues, nurses can influence change in practice and make their ideas a reality.

When writing a business case, it is vital to identify the financial impact and implications – how much is the initiative expected to cost? How much is it likely to save? A new service will need funding, so the costs and benefits of developing it should be fully researched. All financial aspects must be considered, and presented as much detail as possible. Estimates are acceptable as long as they are based on the most up-to-date evidence available; they can be updated as the project moves forward. If an organisation is going to invest money in a project, leaders and commissioners will want to know the return on investment (Box 1).

As the BHF (2017) explains:

"the financial section of any business case is crucial and will be analysed closely. When putting this section together, it’s important to get help and advice from your organisation’s finance department to make sure that any additional or hidden costs are stated clearly."

The financial section also needs continual review, so if things go haywire, the project is rethought, refocused – or ended.

Questions to consider are:
- What are the estimated costs?
- How will the project contribute to...
Nursing Practice

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What is the value of specialist nurses?
When writing a business case, you may want to demonstrate the value there is in employing specialist nurses. The Royal College of Nursing (2010) has identified that the role can save money, arguing that it helps to:
- Reduce waiting times;
- Avoid unnecessary hospital admissions or readmissions (through reduced complications post surgery, enhanced symptom control and improved patient self-management);
- Reduce the length of post-operative hospital stays;
- Free up consultant appointments for other patients;
- Deliver services at the point of need or in the community;
- Reduce patient drop-out rates;
- Educate health and social care professionals;
- Introduce innovative service delivery frameworks;
- Give direct specialist advice to patients and families.

The BHF (2015) adds that specialist nurse roles are also important in providing care throughout patients’ disease trajectories, from diagnosis to end of life.

There have been concerns that the role of specialist nurses may become overlooked or misunderstood and, in 2014, the RCN highlighted that funding issues were having a negative impact on the role, stating that we were in a situation: “whereby funds are being transferred from the NHS for integrated health and social care with no guarantee that the money will be spent on care provision” (RCN, 2014).

There are different ways to approach integration across organisations, services or between individuals, and different models have been successfully implemented in the UK and beyond (Goodwin and Smith, 2011). The RCN calls for nurse-led teams in hospitals and the community, and in specialist services to develop working relationships and collaborate across health and social care (RCN, 2014).

As Fletcher (2011) pointed out, specialist nurses are held in high regard by patients, and consistently so, compared with other health professionals. It is crucial to gain feedback from patients. However, as Fletcher explained, this feedback in itself is not sufficient evidence for commissioners, as it can be considered anecdotal, and specialist nurses: “need to ensure they have evidence their services are cost-effective and improve patient safety and outcomes.”

Conclusion
Writing a business case can be frustrating. It is made easier by engaging decision makers from the outset to ensure the proposal is set within the national context and identify how it will help the organisation to reach its targets.

You will need to gain the right strategic support and source as much accurate data and information as possible. Researching ideas, gaining feedback from stakeholders inside your organisation and, where possible, influencing people from partner organisations, will help your project gain momentum. Involving patients and getting qualitative feedback to support the quantitative data will enhance your proposal.

Nurses are often reluctant to write business cases, and it mainly falls to leaders or commissioners. However, with the right support, they can develop the confidence to articulate a service development idea formally and bring it into the strategic arena.

References