

APS Professional Practice

On 26 November 2015 the Australian Government released its Response to the Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services and indicated that the 31 Primary Health Networks (PHNs) will play a key role in the reform process through the planning and commissioning of primary mental health services at a regional level. PHNs are required to identify local needs in relation to mental health and work with community members and local service providers to develop a regional mental health plan and commission services to address the areas of prioritised need.

From 1st July 2016, the funding for Commonwealth government programs such as Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) and Mental Health Services for Rural and Remote Australia (MHSRRA) was moved into a flexible funding pool to support the commissioning of services in each PHN.

Since each of the 31 PHNs must meet *local* needs, there will be considerable variation between the PHNs in terms of the type of services they will be seeking and how they want these services to be delivered. PHNs will require organisations and practices to tender for this work. Historically, writing a tender has not been core business for psychological practices and is generally something many psychologists would prefer to avoid. This document provides some general advice and tips regarding responding to a PHN tender. However, members must ensure they meet the *specific requirements* of their respective PHN tender.

Getting started

How do I find PHN tender opportunities? Most PHNs will operate an electronic procurement site on their website through which they will publish expressions of interest for the delivery of services. In most cases you will need to register to use the site – there is generally no charge to register. Once you are registered, you will be sent email notifications of tenders and be able to download tender documents and upload applications.

Deciding whether or not to apply: In considering whether or not to respond to a tender, consider the following:

- What are the mandatory requirements of the tender and can you meet them (e.g., a minimum coverage for professional indemnity and public liability insurance; number of clients that will be required to be seen; required response time to referrals; accreditation requirements; clinical governance requirements; data entry requirements)
- Can you show relevant experience? What is your track record in working with the particular cohort or delivering the type of service that is the focus of the tender?
- Who is the competition?
- Is the contract the right 'size' for your business and will it clash with any existing or upcoming work commitments for your practice?
- Consider what the terms of the contract would be if you were successful in the tender and whether your practice can meet them. What are the deliverables? What are the timelines? How will funding be provided? (e.g., block funding or by occasion of service)

- What is the profit potential and impact on the cash flow of the practice?
- What is your capacity to engage additional staff to meet the requirements of the tender?
- What are the risks for your business if you were successful in getting the tender? Can they be effectively managed?

Writing the tender

In writing a tender, it is imperative you follow the process required by the PHN and get the application in, on or before the due date.

Note that the advice from members who have been successful in tendering for PHN contracts is that being skilled in writing tenders is only part of being successful – the tender must be able to show that the practice provides a quality service supported by robust policies and strong clinical governance.

Do some background homework before you start writing the tender: Effective writing requires doing some 'homework'. This involves:

- *Reading all of the tender documents!* Ensure you download all of the documents relevant to the tender and read all of them. Attend any information sessions offered by the PHN and go armed with questions.
- Your tender response should demonstrate an understanding of the contract and the needs of the PHN. If you have any queries about the tender process you can contact the PHN, although most organisations will seek to ensure fairness by not providing information to one tenderer over the other.

- Decide on the two or three unique factors that will persuade the PHN that yours is the best proposal to meet their needs.
- Familiarise yourself with the Department of Health PHN website and the PHN grant programme guidelines: <http://tinyurl.com/phnguidelines>. Keep an eye on the PHN website as it may be updated to reflect the evolution of the PHN Programme. The Primary Mental Health Care Guidelines may also be useful: <http://tinyurl.com/pmhcguidelines>.
- Prepare or arrange your accountant to prepare copies of your organisation's financial statements (including balance sheets and profit and loss accounts).
- The tender may ask for references and you should provide the names of referees relevant to the requirements of the tender.

Writing the tender:

- Use the provided template if there is one. Stick to the set word limit.
- Read the questions you are being asked and respond in full to each question.
- Do not assume the PHN has knowledge of your practice – spell it out.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the required service/s and provide evidence of relevant, recent experience (usually not more than 3 years old). Ensure your proposal is centred on client service being the priority and provide detailed and comprehensive information about how you will achieve this.
- Check if the questions are weighted for marks and answer accordingly, so questions with more weighting will require more detail.
- Make sure your document is well presented with no typographical errors; use plain language and avoid jargon. Your audience is unlikely to be a psychologist and may not even be a health professional.
- Critically appraise your application before submitting it: check you have answered all of the questions in the specific order asked and included all required attachments. This sounds obvious but you would be surprised how many people do not do it and this might exclude your tender from succeeding to be shortlisted.