

Learning for the NHS on procurement and supply chain management: a rapid evidence assessment

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Plain English summary

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To ensure day-to-day operation, NHS trusts purchase a wide range of goods and services which, along with other non-staff expenditure, account for about 30% of their total spend. Routine items, from surgical gloves and syringes to imaging and laboratory materials, are essential to the provision of high-quality care and effective treatment, but there is concern that what is being spent in this area may not always provide value for money. Identifying ways to make the processes of purchasing such items more efficient holds considerable potential for cost savings.

In this study, we reviewed experiences in sectors other than health care and countries other than the UK that may provide useful insights for the NHS to ensure that services are delivered efficiently. We focused on the process of managing purchasing activities, which in the public sector is frequently referred to as procurement.

We found that collective approaches to purchasing, improving relationships with suppliers, building capabilities and skills for purchasing decisions in the NHS, and the use of technology for data and materials management may lead to more efficient procurement and potentially save costs. However, published studies were often poorly conducted and described, frequently relying on data from a single case study only. It is therefore difficult to derive robust conclusions on what would work best and in what contexts. There is a need for further research using rigorous methodology to assess the effectiveness of different types of interventions in different settings for improving procurement and supply chain management.

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