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Evaluation of the Children's Commissioning Support Resource: Final Report

Summary Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Between May 2011 and February 2012 the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the Children's Commissioning Support Resource (CCSR). The aims of the evaluation were to **assess the impact and effectiveness of the CCSR** as a tool to contribute to improvements in placement stability for looked after children (LAC) and the strategic placement planning undertaken by local authorities (LAs) in Wales. This report presents the findings from the research and sets out recommendations and implications for the way forward[1].

2. The CCSR was introduced in 2006 as part of a wider package of policy changes and developments intended to improve market management, placement strategy and choice for LAC. Its **core purpose is to provide an effective tool to assist the process of finding available provision and matching it with children's needs**. CCSR is also intended to encourage and facilitate the identification of strategic joint commissioning opportunities and improve market management for placements for LAC. The core functions of the CCSR are to:

    *   support LAC placement teams within the 22 LAs in Wales, through the provision of a searchable database of available placement provision and use of a case management function to track search activity;

    *   provide management information about the placement market across the 22 LAs;

    *   supply a placement tendering facility[2];

    *   record information from a provider verification process and allow searches to filter based on the verification rating[3].

3. The **interim report for the evaluation (September 2011) found that**:

    *   the CCSR is being used to varying degrees by LAs, ranging from frequent use as part of the overall placement process, to rarely, if at all;

    *   awareness and usage of the CCSR to access management information (MI) is relatively limited across both LAs and providers;

    *   most providers responding to the survey used the CCSR regularly and had a high level of satisfaction with its user-friendliness and functionality, but most felt it was not being used as effectively as it could be by LAs or providers;

    *   other stakeholders and LAs identified a range of design and implementation issues;

    *   whilst the CCSR had not met initial expectations, there have been some benefits arising for some users: such as providing a good starting point or signpost for placement searches, being an enabler of more informed decision-making and contributing to the evidence base for decisions made.

4. The evidence from the research subsequently undertaken[4] supports and develops the key finding that **the CCSR has provided some value but is not achieving its goal to have a significant impact on strategic planning or placement stability for LAC**.

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[1] We are aware that there may have been organisational and technical changes that effect CCSR and the way it is used since the fieldwork was undertaken for this report, but the report is an accurate reflection of the situation at the time.
[2] 15 LAs were signed up for this at the time of the research.
[3] Again 15 LAs were signed up for this at the time of the research.

5. The case studies provide further understanding of how **the CCSR is supporting the placement finding process for some users in some LA areas,** through for example:

    - providing a database of available care settings and vacancies, primarily used to search for placements with external providers[5] and for more challenging cases;

    - the tendering function available in some areas offering a useful mechanism for identifying placements where there is time for a planned approach;

    - information available from CCSR informing planning and decisions in a small number of cases.

6. They also highlight, however, **inefficiencies and inconsistency across LAs when using CCSR which impacts on overall effectiveness and impact**:

    - the CCSR is not used comprehensively across or within the 22 LAs;

    - the CCSR sometimes holds incomplete and out-of-date information about the provision available;

    - there are inconsistent practices across LAs and providers when using CCSR for placement searches.

7. This inconsistent use and practice **limits the potential value of CCSR in supporting the process of finding the 'right placement' for all LAC** and in providing accurate management information:

    - the evidence suggests that CCSR is only seen as being helpful in a small number of placement searches - for example in one LA case study: *"66% of placements are made without using CCSR";*

    - variable practices in using and updating CCSR combined with differing interpretations of the selection criteria mean that:

        – placements searches on CCSR can yield unreliable information and therefore be of limited value to placement finders;

        – data on the gaps between demand and supply presents a limited and sometimes inaccurate picture.

8. There is a **range of inter-dependent factors that have prevented the CCSR from effectively meeting the needs** of all placement finders:

    - aspects of **functionality**:

        – the selection criteria are over-ambitious in trying to pin-point rather than shortlist potential placements;

        – the CCSR is narrow in scope which limits its potential to support placement finding and commissioning practices (e.g. it does not allow searches for

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[4] In-depth consultations in six LA areas, with placement finders, commissioners and providers.
[5] That is private and voluntary providers, as opposed to in-house LA provision (internal).

vacancies about to come up; nor does it currently record comprehensive information about placement needs, throughput and outcomes);

- **usability**:
    - there is a lack of clarity and standardisation in the terminology and approaches to using CCSR, which undermines the value and reliability of searches and information;
    - some users feel the system is time-consuming and not overly user-friendly;
- **leadership and direction** – in the last few years, implementation of the CCSR has lacked clear ownership, drive and direction, which together with some over-reliance on technical rather than whole-systems approaches, has resulted in some misuse and inefficiencies;
- **engagement and awareness raising** – whilst positive feedback has been received about the training and support offered by the technical team, there has been a gap in general guidance, information and training that clearly understands end user needs and identifies how to make best use of the CCSR to support the placement finding process;
- **unrealistic expectations?** - there are some questions about the realism of expecting the CCSR to have a tangible impact on placement stability, given that it is just one tool within a complex set of factors that influences being able to find the best placement for each LAC;
- **historical and political factors** – there is a range of issues that have influenced roll-out and implementation of CCSR across Wales.

9. There are positive attitudes amongst some national, LAs and provider stakeholders that, whilst the CCSR has not fully realised its initial goals, **"there is a place for CCSR....but not in its current form".** There is a clear need to improve effectiveness and use.

10. The interlinked nature of the issues influencing its success means that it is difficult at this stage to set a specific path towards improved effectiveness. It is clear however, that the **first and major step required is to develop much clearer ownership, leadership and direction**.

Recommendations:

1) The CCSR could offer greater value to LAC placement planning and commissioning if clearer collective ownership and direction was provided across the 22 LAs. LAs should therefore identify (within the current developing structures for regional planning and commissioning) a resource(s) and/or facilitator(s) to more effectively lead and direct a whole-system based approach to improvement and implementation of the CCSR going forward.

2) Caution should be taken when considering the application of a CCSR-type approach to other contexts, such as for adults and specialist provision. Whilst there are positive attitudes towards the concept of a database of this nature supporting effective placement finding, there are significant lessons to be learnt from the implementation of CCSR.

Themes to address to develop a more effective tool:

1) Identify and communicate *a clear and re-focused goal*, which is shared across all LAs and users. At the validation event for this research stakeholders agreed that it should be: *"a tool to help find the best placement for all children in all cases"*. Questions to address include:

   - should it be used for both internal and external placement searches, or could it be just providing access to the national market for specialist provision?
   - should it be useful for emergency placements?
   - should it provide more information to inform commissioning - placement needs, throughput and outcomes?

2) With the re-focused goal in mind, *address significant functionality and usability issues,* which might include, for example:

   - amending the selection criteria approach;
   - developing a more intuitive system – looking for vacancies in the future;
   - developing functionality to capture placement information – where made, outcomes, placement changes etc;
   - developing all-Wales use of the tendering function;
   - aligning with other systems/approaches (e.g. in-house social care systems).

3) Develop an *effective change management approach*, for example:

   - redesigning the database to address the issues for Theme 2) above should involve the 'end user' to establish 'what will be helpful for you?';
   - addressing the variability in practices and increasing use of the CCSR across LAs and providers will involve:
     – changing attitudes and re-engagement at several levels across LAs and providers;
     – developing standard definitions, terminology and consistent practices;
     – offering clear and more relevant guidance, support and training, focused on the needs of placement finders, commissioners and providers;
   - we understand that the CCSR functionality is currently being developed to support the introduction of the pan-Wales Framework Agreement – there needs to be explicit and relevant guidance for LA commissioners and placement finders about how the existence of the Framework Agreement will affect use and searches on CCSR.