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

Summary report



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Summary report

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In May 2011 the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the Children's Commissioning Support Resource (CCSR). The aims of the evaluation are 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 interim findings from the fieldwork undertaken up to the end of August 2011¹.
2. This report is based on the findings from the fieldwork conducted to date which includes:
 - consultations with strategic stakeholders nominated by the Welsh Government;
 - consultations with individuals across 22 LAs;
 - an online survey of 103² private and voluntary placement providers;
 - analysis of data about LAC, the placement market and the use of the CCSR.

Summary of Findings

Use of the CCSR

3. 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. Only a small number use the CCSR comprehensively for all their placement searches. LAs are more likely to be using the CCSR just for those where an 'external' placement³ is being sought and/or to meet specialist, residential or challenging needs. The data on the use of the CCSR shows that 67% of searches in 2010/11 involved selecting specific services: the most common were behavioural problems (54% of searches) mental health problems (24%) and substance misuse (19%).
4. It is more common for LAs to run 'care setting' rather than 'vacancy' searches to inform their placement planning; with the latter more likely to be undertaken in LAs outside of the SEWIC region in 2010/11. A number of the LA consultees questioned the value of vacancy searches because they are not perceived as being up-to-date, with some also questioning whether it is realistic to expect this from providers or a database facility given the importance of the provider conversation (for example, sometimes providers can 'create' a vacancy if they feel they can meet the specified need).

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 Representing a 43% response rate.

³ A placement with a private or voluntary provider, rather than in local authority in-house foster care or residential home.

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5. The SEWIC LAs (and more recently additional LAs in mid- and west Wales) have access to two additional functions on the CCSR – provider verification and placement tendering. Explicit use of verification in searches is not common (only 20% of searches conducted by SEWIC LAs in 2010/11 involved selection of a verification rating) and there appears to be some lack of clarity about the value or way in which this function can be used. Qualitative feedback suggests that the tendering function is used by SEWIC LAs following a search for external providers though there is also a suggestion in some areas that providers contact LAs directly by phone/email rather than always responding via the portal.
 6. Awareness and usage of the CCSR to access management information (MI) is relatively limited – only two LAs reported regularly using MI from the CCSR in a managed and strategic way though others had accessed the CCSR occasionally to keep track of and evidence historic searches for individual LAC. The SEWIC partnership also access and use MI from the CCSR to inform planning. Other reasons for using MI include assessing gaps in care and costs for placements to engage providers in dialogue about fees.

Design, Implementation and Effectiveness of the CCSR

7. Around half of LAs indicated a relatively positive approach towards using the CCSR for placement searches; a quarter had mixed attitudes and a quarter had negative views. Some functions were identified as facilitating the usability of the CCSR, including the case management function, the resources/document library and technical support from the CCSR team. However, the majority of consultees identified some challenges associated with the functionality of the CCSR, most notably:
 - **Quality/value of vacancy information:** LAs do not feel vacancy information is kept up to date and feel that in order for it to be useful, it would need to be updated daily, which is not a practical option;
 - **The selection criteria can hinder the search:** A range of issues were identified about the nature and specificity of the tick box criteria, which can result in misleading information or searches that are either too specific (providers not identified who could meet the child’s needs) or too broad (too many providers identified);
 - **Limited time saving:** Some LAs do not see the value in the search as they still need to call the providers to ensure a suitable match anyway;
 - **Unhelpful for emergency placements:** Some LAs find it quicker and easier to search the internet, email and/or phone providers when a quick decision is required.
8. Some LAs also highlighted concerns about usability, talking about “clunky” and “frustrating” processes.
9. Views on the day-to-day management of the CCSR are largely positive. LAs and stakeholders are positive about the support received from the CCSR Central Team and the vast majority of consultees within LAs have received at least one training session on using the CCSR.

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10. However there is a sense from both LAs and stakeholders that the initial drive and direction that was evident when the CCSR was first introduced has diminished. Alongside this there is a feeling that it has not met initial expectations and that there is a significant mismatch between expectations of what the CCSR was originally intended to do and the reality. This appears to have resulted partially from some views that initial plans were for the 'Support Resource' element to be more than 'just a database', to involve centralised staff experienced in the provision of care of LAC providing national support to LAs to source and locate appropriate placements.
 11. Other factors that have influenced usage at LA level include:
 - some feel that the implementation approach was too 'top-down', being centrally driven without enough consultation with LAs to identify their needs and how they might use it;
 - some remain somewhat mistrustful of the quality of providers contained on the database. Although the verification process is viewed positively by those in the SEWIC collaborative, there is still a prevailing preference amongst LAs to use providers with whom they have an established relationship;
 - information contained on forms such as Placement Forms and Care Plans can vary and is inconsistent across LAs. This therefore affects the consistency of information entered onto the CCSR.

Benefits and Outcomes

12. There are very mixed views about the benefits and outcomes arising from use of the CCSR, which are clearly influenced by overall general attitudes towards the CCSR and how it is used within LAs.
13. Overall, our consultations to date suggest that some of the initial expectations about the extent to which the CCSR might contribute to improved placement stability and strategic planning have not been realised. This is to some extent a function of those expectations being somewhat exaggerated for what is essentially a tool or resource to inform decision making. Equally, however, there are also issues around the extent to which the core functions of the CCSR have been fully developed or are operating effectively.
14. Nevertheless, the emerging findings point to some clear benefits arising from the CCSR – it is a good starting point or signpost for placement searches, an enabler of more informed decision-making, and contributes to the evidence base for the decisions made. Whilst one or two LAs felt that some contribution to improved placement stability resulted from these benefits, most felt that, whilst the CCSR contributes to decision-making, it does not and cannot impact significantly on placement stability. With relatively low awareness and use of the MI available from the CCSR team, only four LAs identified positive benefits arising from use of MI.

Provider Feedback

15. Most providers responding to the survey used the CCSR regularly and had a high level of satisfaction with its user-friendliness and functionality, and with the training provided by the CCSR Central team.

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16. Providers did not feel that the CCSR was being used by LAs and providers as effectively as it could be and had generally negative views about the contribution it had made to improving dialogue and discussion with LAs.
 17. Most providers felt that the CCSR is a useful resource for increasing LA knowledge about available placements. Around two-fifths of providers responding to the survey perceived that it may be making a contribution to better matching of placements and improved stability of placements for some LAC.

Issues to Investigate during Case Study Fieldwork

18. Based on the findings and issues raised at the interim reporting stage, we have identified a number of key issues to investigate further during the case study phase of the study, as follows:
 - A) **Up-to-date Vacancies?** A number of stakeholders said they thought that vacancies were not kept up to date on the CCSR. We will seek further clarity around whether these are perceptions or a reality. We will also investigate how often it would be necessary for providers to update the vacancy information if it was to be up-to-date on an ongoing basis;
 - B) **Grand expectations?** We will seek to understand in more detail what the initial 'grand' expectations for the CCSR were that stakeholders feel have not been fulfilled;
 - C) **Tick boxes:** We will investigate further what it is about the tick-box list that does not appear to work as effectively as intended. Is it that providers do not record the information correctly (ticking too many or not enough boxes)? Is it that information is not up-to-date? Is it that resource finders do not operate good search practices? Is it the design or nature of the tick-boxes?
 - D) **Internal use:** We will seek to establish why LAs are not commonly using the CCSR for internal placement searches. Would the CCSR be of more value in producing MI if used for internal searches? What internal systems do LAs operate instead of using CCSR?
 - E) **Not user-friendly?** We will investigate in what ways some users find use of the CCSR clunky and frustrating;
 - F) **Use of MI:** We will seek to understand better if and how LAs are using MI from the CCSR; and if they are not using it, how else they seek to understand which needs are the gaps in provision that they need to address.