
Joint Evaluation of the Commissioning Support Programme (CSP) and Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO)

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1 Introduction and Background

In autumn 2009, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) LLP was commissioned by the Department for Education to conduct a two-year, independent evaluation of two major improvement programmes, the Commissioning Support Programme (CSP) and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO). The C4EO and the CSP, were launched in July and November 2008, respectively, and represent a different approach, based on the idea of sector-led improvement support.

Throughout the course of the evaluation, a new government administration was formed and the improvement landscape for children's services moved from a system which consisted mainly of a range of central initiatives to one where a sector-led model for improvement is now in line with the dominant strand of government thinking. These policy changes make the experience and learnings from the C4EO and CSP programmes even more crucial to the further development of a sector-led improvement model.

The final report, based on Year 2 findings, will inform the development of a sector-led model of improvement support through the identification of those aspects of both the CSP and the C4EO, most valued by the sector and which have had the most impact.

2 Key findings

The key findings for each programme, are outlined below. It is not the purpose of the evaluation to compare the programmes to each other and the findings for each are set out separately.

C4EO

- There is a very good awareness of C4EO products and services, and good engagement with the programme. C4EO research evidence is very strongly used and valued by the sector.
- The majority of Directors of Children's Services that have accessed tailored support have been happy with it, but a small number prefer the option to buy in support from suppliers of their choice.
- The majority of e-survey respondents reported that their skills and knowledge had increased as a result of accessing the C4EO products and services.
- There are early indications of positive impact on service delivery, and signs of potential impact on outcomes for children and young people. Over three quarters of Directors of Children's Services reported that the C4EO has helped the local area to identify different and improved ways of working.

- Over half the Directors of Children's Services felt that improvements achieved as a result of C4EO support will be sustained.

CSP

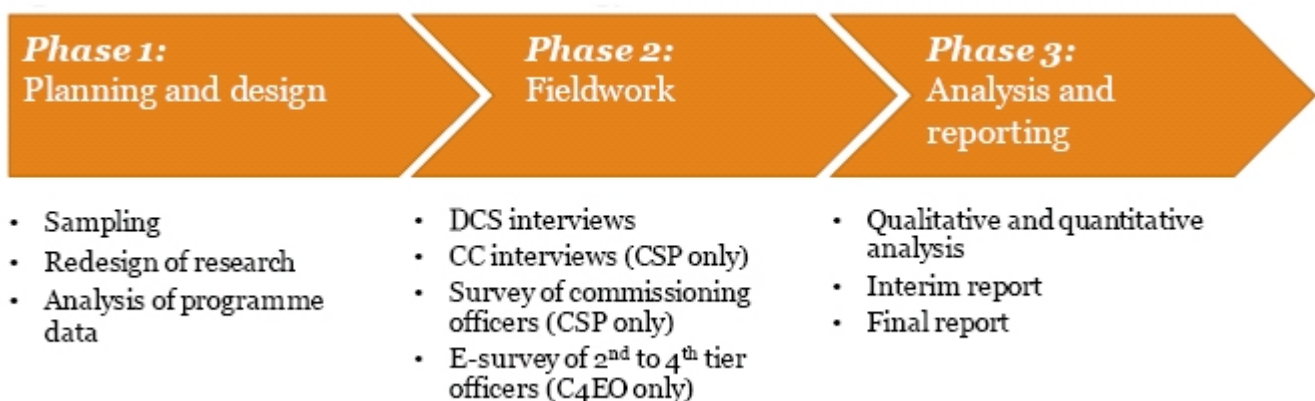
- There continues to be awareness and high usage of the CSP products and services by the sector. Bespoke support is reported as the most valued element of the CSP amongst Commissioning Champions.
- Bespoke support and training are the two CSP elements seen by the sector to be contributing the most to enhancing the skills and knowledge of commissioners.
- Half of Commissioning Champions and commissioners believe that CSP has had an impact on service delivery to date, mainly due to bespoke support and training.
- An increasing proportion of commissioners perceive that CSP has had an impact on outcomes for children and young people to date.
- The sector was positive about the sustainability of the benefits of the CSP programme in terms of its contribution to raising awareness of effective commissioning as a driver of better outcomes, and the skills to deliver it.

3 Methodology

PwC gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from Directors of Children's Services, Commissioning Champions and other users of CSP and C4EO services and products. PwC also carried out desk-based analysis of programme information.

The Figure below outlines our methodology, which comprised three key phases. The fieldwork was carried out from 17th December 2010 to 31st January 2011.

Figure 1 -Overview of methodology



The final report is based on the views of 733 respondents, predominantly from local authorities, but also from other local area organisations and the voluntary and community sector. The C4EO e-survey had a

response rate of 15% from a sample size of 2,737; and the CSP e-survey had a response rate of 21% from a sample size of 1,456. Figure 2 outlines our proposed and achieved sample for Year 2.

Figure 2 -Overview of fieldwork and sample for Year 2

<i>Interview group</i>	<i>Programme evaluated</i>	<i>Proposed achieved sample per tranche</i>	<i>Achieved sample</i>
Interview programme			
Directors of Children’s Services	C4EO and CSP	50	50
Commissioning Champions	CSP	50	53
E-surveys			
2nd – 4th Tier Officers in the local area, Voluntary and Community sector	C4EO	300	354
Local Authority commissioners	CSP	300	276

PwC developed a programme lifecycle to provide a framework for analysing the findings from the evaluation. This breaks down the programmes into four key stages: awareness; engagement; impact on services; and impact on outcomes. These stages reflect how interventions in complex systems can lead to change, first at an individual level and then, as this change becomes more widespread, at an organisational level. These generic stages are shown in the figure below and summarised below.

Figure 3.1: Summary of programme lifecycle (or ‘Change Journey’)



- **Stage 1** -Awareness of the programme – the early stages of a programme.
- **Stage 2** -Engagement with programme –individual programme users may start to feel the benefit of enhanced knowledge and confidence gained from participation.
- **Stage 3** -Impact on services –processes and systems now begin to show some impact from the enhanced level of knowledge and skills of individual users.

- **Stage 4** -Impact on outcomes – this is final stage of the and also the most difficult stage to assess. The time lag from impact on services to outcomes will vary across services. It is often also difficult to isolate the impact of the programme from wider initiatives.

4 Findings

This section provides an overview and summary of the main findings for each programme, which are structured around the research questions for the evaluation.

Programme overview

C4EO

C4EO aims to assist in the improvement of outcomes by identifying and coordinating local, regional and national evidence to create a single and comprehensive picture of effective practice. This evidence is designed to support local areas in improving services. C4EO's products and services are broadly grouped into the following areas:

1. Research evidence;
2. Validated Local Practice and Promising Practice;
3. Networking opportunities, event and workshops;
4. Tailored support delivered by Sector Specialists; and
5. Cost effectiveness products and services.

CSP

The CSP has a remit to support more effective commissioning of services by local authorities and their local area partners, which will drive improvements in outcomes.

Since May 2010, the majority of activity has taken place at a local level. There are six key elements to the offer:

1. A Self Analysis and Planning exercise (SAP);
2. Bespoke Support;
3. Networking Opportunities;
4. Online Resources (Resource Bank and Community Area);
5. Training and Development; and
6. Enhanced Support.

Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) -findings

Awareness of and engagement with of key programme elements

Awareness of the key components of the C4EO's **products and services** is very high and has increased since year 1 of the evaluation. Most Directors of Children's Services perceive that the programme is closely linked, and responsive, to their challenges as local area leaders, and that the C4EO is well positioned to support them.

There is also very strong awareness of the 'for the sector, from the sector' approach which includes the use of frontline practitioners to deliver tailored support, and the collaboration between the sector and C4EO in developing the range of products and services available.

Directors of Children's Services and e-survey respondents continue to find C4EO **research evidence** the most useful and relevant element of the programme offer. Research evidence is seen as being accessible, of high quality, acting as an authoritative guide to effective practice in children's services, and tailored for a variety of audiences. This makes it valuable for supporting local area improvement and development.

Respondents reported that C4EO **events and networking** opportunities provide a valuable means of improving individual skills and knowledge, although Directors of Children's Services are concerned their ability to release staff to attend events in the new financial climate.

The sector welcomes **Validated Local Practice and Promising Practice** examples as a quality assured means of sharing and accessing best practice, including costed examples. The majority of e-survey respondents suggested that these local practice examples had given them ideas for new initiatives.

There has been increased usage of **tailored support** throughout the course of the evaluation, with positive responses from those Directors of Children's Services and e-survey respondents who have experienced it. E-survey respondents from small local authorities were more likely to feel that tailored support from sector specialists had enhanced skills and knowledge in their local areas compared with those from larger authorities. A small number of Directors of Children's Services would still prefer to purchase external support directly from the market rather than brokering a sector specialist through C4EO.

Benefits and issues of sector specialists

Proximity to the sector was reported as a key benefit of sector specialists. As current practitioners, sector specialists were particularly credible in respect of their knowledge of the day to day challenges facing local areas. Some Directors of Children's Services valued the '**critical friend**' challenge and insights provided by

the sector specialists, while others valued the additional capacity that this time-limited support provided. Three quarters of e-survey respondents believed that support from the sector specialists enhanced the skills and knowledge of staff in their local areas.

Providing sector specialists to work with other local authorities was also seen as beneficial, as they were seen as **bringing additional insights and experience back to their local areas**. Over three quarters of e-survey respondents that had accessed tailored support said they would welcome the opportunity to provide support to another local area as a sector specialist.

The issue most consistently raised in relation to the use of sector specialists was concern about the **sustainability of the model** given the difficulties local authorities face in releasing staff to act as sector specialists.

Tailored support delivered by C4EO was **regarded as being more valuable than traditional field forces** by the majority of Directors of Children's Services that held a view. This is due to the clarity of the brief (genuine improvement support without inspection responsibilities) and also due to the model of using current practitioners. A small number of Directors of Children's Services reported that the quality of tailored support is reliant on the individual providing it rather than whether it is delivered through C4EO or a field force.

Impact of the programme

The C4EO programme has made a positive contribution to **developing the skills and knowledge of the sector**. The majority of e-survey respondents reported that their skills and knowledge had increased as a result of accessing C4EO products and services and almost half reported that this support had been significant in terms of building capacity. About half of Directors of Children's Services agreed that the C4EO had helped staff to enhance their skills and knowledge on specific issues.

There are indications of a positive **impact on service delivery**. Over three quarters of Directors of Children's Services reported that the C4EO has helped the local area to identify different and improved ways of working.

Respondents found it more difficult to attribute **impact on outcomes** to the C4EO products and services but were broadly positive. Over a third of e-survey respondents confirmed that individual products and services had had a significant impact, whilst about half of Directors of Children's Services felt that the C4EO had had a positive impact on outcomes in their local area.

There is endorsement of C4EO's range of **cost effectiveness products** as a useful and valuable means of addressing new challenges to provide value for money services. However, both e-survey respondents and Directors of Children's Services were reluctant to fully attribute local area financial savings directly to C4EO products and services.

Sustainability of programme benefits

E-survey respondents and Directors of Children's Services **view many of the materials as having a legacy** if they continue to be available electronically and can be re-visited as new challenges emerge.

Where a positive impact on services or outcomes is perceived, as a result of C4EO support, many respondents felt that the changing and challenging local conditions will impact on sustainability. Over half of the Directors of Children's Services were positive that improvements achieved as a result of C4EO support will be sustained. Directors of Children's Services who reported this, were those most likely to have embedded the support from C4EO in local area plans and practice.

Conditions that enhance C4EO impact

Directors of Children's Services and e-survey respondents reported that the most important factor was that the local authority needed to be outwards facing, ready to access support and open to change. Two additional factors that were also identified as being important were senior management sponsoring the use of the C4EO and the local authority of having a culture of embedding learning into core planning, delivery and evaluation activities.

Commissioning Support Programme (CSP) -findings

Awareness of and engagement with of key programme elements

The Directors of Children's Services, Commissioning Champions and commissioners who participated in the evaluation, value the overall CSP offer and see it as relevant to their commissioning activities. There is very good awareness and high levels of usage across all of the CSP's core services.

Whilst commissioners have made most use of the CSP's **universal elements** (online resources, networking events and training and development), Commissioning Champions and Directors of Children's Services have reported that the **bespoke support** is the element of the CSP that they have found most useful.

Commissioners value the opportunities the CSP has provided via **its networking events**, in bringing people together to learn from each other. Over half of commissioners surveyed believed that the networking events had helped them to commission services more effectively. **Enhanced support**, a more recent part of the CSP's offer, was the least accessed service, but those who have accessed it spoke positively, with some commissioners feeling it will play a greater role in 12 months time.

Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions identified the value of the CSP in bringing people together to share good practice and benchmark, as well as being a '**critical friend**' that is providing bespoke and responsive support. The majority of Commissioning Champions interviewed agreed that the network of contacts made through the CSP has helped them to commission services more effectively in a significantly changing (networked) environment.

Benefits and issues of local and regional leads and the commissioning champion role

The CSP local lead role is viewed positively, respondents more readily sighted on the local lead, compared with the CSP regional lead. The local leads are seen as being an effective delivery model for driving, co-coordinating and delivering packages of support.

Commissioning Champions are the primary link with CSP local leads and over half of Commissioning Champions interviewed who held a view, perceived CSP local leads to

provide more value than a traditional field force. A key benefit over a traditional field force is their independence and ability to start from the local authority's agenda.

The Commissioning Champion role was generally viewed positively, particularly as a point of contact with the programme which enabled real engagement between the local area and the programme. Another cited benefit was its contribution to helping raise the profile of commissioning within the local area. There was uncertainty whether the role would continue in the future as commissioning became more mainstreamed within teams, and given the new financial climate.

Impact of the programme

The CSP support was reported to have improved the **skills and knowledge of staff**. Around three quarters of commissioners believed that the CSP's bespoke support and training and development had improved their skills and knowledge. The Resources Bank on the CSP website is viewed as a valuable body of sector knowledge, over half of commissioners stated that it had helped them to commission more effectively.

The CSP was reported to have had an **impact on service delivery**. Half of the commissioners and Commissioning Champions we spoke to felt that the CSP has had an impact on service delivery. The main

drivers of this were training and bespoke support. The majority of commissioners felt that bespoke support had strengthened commissioning processes in the local area, a key foundation to improving service delivery. Commissioners were more likely to report that the CSP helped to strengthen partnerships in their local area, compared with Year 1.

Roughly a third of commissioners perceive that the CSP has had an **impact on outcomes**, which is an increase from Year 1, where less than a quarter of commissioners perceived this to be true. Training is felt to have played the greatest part in this. Respondents felt that training and bespoke support will also contribute most to improving outcomes over the next 12 months time.

The CSP's reported impact on creating efficiencies to date is varied, but Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions had a more positive view about the CSP's likely future impact on efficiencies. The majority of commissioners reported that bespoke support and training will help generate efficiencies in 12 months time.

Sustainability of programme benefits

The sector was positive about the sustainability of the benefits from the CSP programme in terms of its contribution to **raising awareness of effective commissioning as a driver of better outcomes**, and the skills to deliver it. There were however concerns about the continuation of the benefits given the financial climate.

A number of themes were identified as defining the point at which effective commissioning becomes self sustaining. These were: stable local leadership; clear governance arrangements around commissioning; a shared understanding or 'culture' of commissioning amongst partners; an enhancement of staff commissioning skills and knowledge base; a secure financial base; and a set of in-house plans to ensure commissioning capabilities are being prioritised.

Conditions that enhance the CSP impact

Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions identified a number of points in a local area's development which have enhanced the impact of the CSP.

Local area strategic partnerships found the CSP to be of particular benefit if they were at the point of developing their vision and approach to commissioning. Other points include when the local area is developing operational commissioning arrangements and when there is stability within the local area. Local areas can benefit from the CSP most when organisations are outwards facing and open to learning.

Conditions which enable a sector-led model to develop

Factors influencing readiness for improvement

Directors of Children's Services and Commissioning Champions were asked which factors needed to be in place to trigger or enhance an area's readiness for improvement. Those raised most consistently were:

- The importance of strong leadership;
- Effective partnership working;
- Clarity and direction regarding the national policy agenda;
- Having sufficient resources;

- Clarity about performance and strengths;
- Having access to research and evidence; and
- External challenge and support.

We also explored with local authorities the local conditions that enhanced the impact of what was achieved from the support they received. The local conditions which were common to both programmes were: an outward facing approach; capacity within the local authority to draw down the support; and sufficient stability in the local area to make use of support.

5 Conclusions and implications

In developing and fine tuning a sector-led model, some of the general features of both programmes that have been most valued by the sector and which are considered to have resulted in greater use of the support by the sector are as follows.

Closeness to users

One of the greatest strengths a sector-led model can have is closeness to its users. A sector-led model needs to utilise this closeness to develop the programme of support. This could be via consultation with the sector on themes felt to be critical to the sector at the time, or it could be through use the results of a local area's self assessment activities to identify packages of bespoke support at a local or regional level. Both the CSP and the C4EO have used a mixture of these methods. The greatest benefit from external support is likely to happen when the programme of support closely mirrors, and is co-created in response to, the challenges the sector faces.

A delivery model which can respond to a range of needs

Both programmes have provided products and services that the sector was able to 'dip into' at a time that suited local needs and priorities. In addition, the range of support offered by both programmes increased over time in response to the expressed demand of users and was offered in a way that allowed different users to select different types of support and different ways of receiving it. A single point of contact for the programme at a local level can help to build awareness and credibility for the support with the local area over an extended period of time. Respondents to the evaluation valued and spoke positively about having this type of relationship.

Benefits and issues of using current practitioners to deliver tailored support.

Both programmes offered a tailored or bespoke support programme element and this was highly valued by users. For example, the sector placed particular value on the fact that the C4EO sector specialists are serving practitioners. The recruitment, accreditation and training of this pool of practitioners has been important to not only encourage a pipeline of people able to perform this role but also to gain the confidence of the sector of the quality and credibility of the support. The decision to use existing practitioners to deliver support also comes with a number of issues. A consistent concern was the extent to which there was sufficient existing capacity within the sector to support it, particularly in the current financial climate.

Significant value of having a reliable evidence base on which to make decisions

All respondents valued the increased research and evidence base that both programmes brought to the sector. The sector has valued the accessibility of the research and the development of validated examples of best practice and emerging ideas to address the challenges it faces. There is a continuing appetite to find out, “what works”, both within the UK context and drawing on international experience.

In order to be embedded effectively in any future sector-led model, these features will also need to be considered against the other significant changes affecting local government, including: the wider austerity measures, the removal of Government Offices and Primary Care Trusts, and an enhanced role for schools and General Practitioner (GP) consortia in commissioning local services.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.