

Case Study: Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru



The promotion and support of excellence in social services in Wales has for many years been the agenda of the Welsh Government. When the Social Services Improvement Agency (SSIA) was set up in 2006 it developed an Accord which placed effective commissioning at the heart of delivering sustainable social services.

Within the Accord, the Social Services Regional Improvement Collaboratives (SSRIC) made clear the need for effective collaboration and integration across local authorities and with other sectors. Collaborative commissioning arrangements and increasingly integrated service models were identified as the drivers to bring about improved outcomes, standardised levels and quality of service, and better financial efficiency.

Part of the SSRIC, the Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru (4C's) is a partnership of 15 local authorities set up to work together to ensure that looked-after children and young people receive high-quality residential and foster placements, education and additional services. Historically local authorities had been carrying out procurement of placements and contract monitoring independently. Each authority was completing the same task but in differing ways, each reaching and contracting different providers through an inconsistent approach. Quality of service therefore varied and pricing was inconsistent across providers, neither of which represented value for money.

The challenge: to implement authority sector-wide, streamlined, fully automated and transparent procurement and monitoring process for children's placements

4C's journey of change began with getting local authorities together to share information on placements, numbers, providers

and pricing. It undertook a procurement process to select the best residential and foster environment providers, starting with a basic strategy of negotiation. It built a survey based on a PQQ to enable it to ask questions about quality of service and terms. It found that lots of suppliers wanted to be verified, so it set up a programme of change that turned into a strategy to implement a Framework.

In 2012 4C's, involving representatives from all stakeholders, including service users, launched two Frameworks, one for foster placement services and the other for residential placement services. They were outcomes-based agreements between local authorities and independent sector providers (private and third-sector organisations). The Frameworks specified the requirements for looked-after children placements and the outcomes for every looked-after child. These are collaborative frameworks, which, for foster, encompasses all 22 Welsh authorities.

Successful providers had to evidence that they could provide placements which met the standards of care and outcomes for children and young people clearly specified. While this was clearly an enormous step towards how 4C's wanted to work with its providers, the organisation lacked a fully automated system that could transform the process into one of efficiency and effectiveness and manage ongoing post-award performance.



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Welsh Government Value Wales eProcurement Service's aim is to build and support a long-term infrastructure for e-procurement in Wales. Through meetings with 4C's it was recognised that whilst it was using a form of approved lists to verify its service providers, no PQQ or ITT existed and no formal process was in place to ask the right questions on which to base value judgements; it also identified the difficulties faced when contract managing contracted providers. The initial objective was to issue an electronic PQQ to retrospectively verify the suppliers it contracted with. Value Wales eProcurement Service then set up a project with the objectives of formalising 4C's Procurement/Commissioning/Contract and Provider Performance monitoring processes using eTender Wales (the BravoSolution-based Welsh Government e-tendering system); BravoSolution was commissioned to assist with the project.

BravoSolution – A world of difference

Alison Smale is Regional Manager with 4C's, responsible for leading its programme of transformational change. "We developed a Framework to achieve three key objectives: best outcomes for looked after children and young people, value for money, sufficiency (local placements that offered choice). Given that we are purchasing between 1200 and 1300 placements at a time, and given the inconsistencies in approach, quality of service and pricing that existed, we needed a way of enabling all stakeholders across the sector to work collaboratively and openly within the Frameworks. We also understood that the award is just the start of the process, that vendor performance and ongoing monitoring is just as important."

"Using BravoSolution has revolutionised our entire process, it has made a world of difference to our approach to tendering, contract management, relationship management, care deficiency management and service review capability."



Pre-BravoSolution – A worrying picture

Before using BravoSolution, 4C's did not go out to tender: placements were spot purchased by each local authority, which often took place over the phone and possibly with providers that were not well known to the buyer. In addition, there were providers of which 4C's had no visibility at all, and there was no systematic gathering of information. Explained Alison: "It created quite a worrying picture, as the system was open to abuse."

For example, at times when we needed a foster placement as a matter of urgency, the price could vary dramatically from when we could provide longer lead times – this was unsustainable. Implementing BravoSolution, in particular e-tendering, has brought a level of fairness to the market via the Frameworks which was sorely lacking."

Implementation and overcoming challenges

Like Alison, Cheryl Cooper, Senior Commissioning Contracts Officer in charge of tendering and evaluation, has been with 4C's since the start of operations.



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“BravoSolution was the obvious choice,” she said, “not just because of its use by eTender Wales, but because, unlike other solutions we considered, it is a tool that does it all. We found that some tools still require a level of intervention, whether that be uploading an Excel spreadsheet or collating paper-based submissions – paper was something we wanted to get away from. Our remit was a completely e-based process, and BravoSolution could provide us with an end-to-end, e-procurement system where all submissions, accompanying documents and all cycles through the lifetime of the tender and award could be managed.” Given that licences were already used by the Welsh Government, system access was straightforward; adoption, however, still had its challenges, partly based on the differences in terminology used by the sector and partly based on fears over the impact on the market.

BravoSolution worked with the project team to adapt the process for e-procurement. It was a two-way learning: 4C's works in quite a complex way and, because every child's needs are different, several of the requirements did not fit the system. “There are children in need of the high end of care, which involves placements through the independent sector, either private organisations or third-sector voluntary organisations or social enterprises – so the sector is wide and diverse. Within that we are purchasing both residential and foster placements. Within

that is a range of placement types. Then, within that, is a pricing matrix which came about as a result of the specification. There are then components to the pricing. It all adds up to making the tender process quite challenging. With a lot of products and many components, we wanted to be able to break down price and be clear what we were buying for each child. BravoSolution was able to adapt the ECM part of the system to enable it to deal with the levels of complexity of the pricing structure; the system now gives us the core price, variations, and additional services that can then be added to the core. As well as this, it allows us to evaluate the different components by giving scores against them, BravoSolution was able to deal with all the different criteria we gave them,” said Alison.

Cheryl hit the nail on the head:

“Procurement is traditionally a very service or product-related term. You can match a heating system with a building, the process is the same; but when you are dealing with human beings, when you are trying to match siblings who have very different needs with one provider, it's a very different story.”

“Services have different rules too,” explained Alison. “We fall into Part B, so another challenge was testing how we comply with Part A procurement rules. On top of that we had the collaborative nature of the task: 22 Welsh authorities with different customers and practices. It took a lot of discussion and development to cater for everyone. There were some concerns over the implications for the market, for example, concern that reducing the number of providers would reduce choice. Lots of modelling was carried out to get the right number of providers versus the impact on supply (placements). Add to that how social services speak a very different language from other sectors and you have a mountain of tasks to address.”



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“BravoSolution worked intensively with us to achieve our goals. Our direct contact was very highly trained and excellent at translating our needs. She understood what we wanted the technology to do. It contributed to a relationship with procurement we had never had before.”

The proof of the pudding ...

Two years later, the team is really beginning to see the fruits of its hard work. “We now have an easy-to-use tool for tender, evaluation, monitoring, viewing results and running reports. With everything automated it saves time and effort in the long run and everything is visible to everyone. The system has brought so many benefits:”

Tendering and evaluation

The system is used to undertake all market sourcing, using PQQs and ITTs in a more business-like manner. “Once the tender is in the system, it is there to be built on or used again without reinventing it in full or in part,” said Alison. “Value Wales developed a SQUID (supplier qualification information database) in conjunction with the public sector which was designed to simplify and standardise the selection stage of procurement. It is stored on the system as a basis for designing our question sets, and suppliers can also store answers to standard questions

for reuse in other procurement exercises. This is a benefit that is transferable to other social care services.”

Once the tender stage has been completed by providers, evaluation starts. This stage in itself brings challenges, as Cheryl explained. “Wales is geographically challenging in bringing people together; by its very nature, locations can be diverse or isolated, but one of the biggest advantages of BravoSolution is that it allows evaluation of tenders to be done remotely, we can evaluate and we don't need a meeting to do it. With a sector-wide approach, a web-based tool makes this easier. We can all see the same information; it's fully visible no matter where we are.”

Electronic Contract Management

Overall Framework contract management and individual contract management was an area that 4C's struggled with as a manual task -- little wonder considering there are 1200 individual contracts at any given time. But it had a vision: to facilitate a collaborative review of suppliers, so that any concerns over compliance could be fed in from different sources and acted upon. “We wanted a way of identifying any issues, risks or emerging themes with a provider, so that we could manage issues with providers in a collaborative way,” said Alison. “It was an area we found the most difficult to implement. We tested out many methods but we now have a system within BravoSolution's e-contract management module, which we have successfully trialled with three local authorities. We can set up individual contracts, milestones in terms of quality and savings, and receive feedback in terms of issues or complaints which we in the regional unit can see. Conversely, the system also receives positive input, or compliments, and there is scope to record this input, allowing us a refreshing opportunity to reward good service – giving us the start of a positive cultural change in this sector.”

Continuous development and monitoring

4C's is now using BravoSolution's vendor performance management (VPM) tool to undertake quality performance assessment with Framework providers. VPM provides them with a scorecard which both they and the provider can see. This is beneficial to both parties. “We now have a robust process to ensure providers maintain their performance levels and improve



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on them. We have developed an annual quality performance assessment that all suppliers complete and which we evaluate through a scorecard system. We carried out our first VPM survey last year, and with the results back from this year, we can now see year-on-year trends in performance of providers. The system gives us reports in terms of charts or graphs that both we and the provider can see and easily understand, and which we use for continuous monitoring and development. This helps us identify areas for improvement and on which we can develop an action plan.”

From a calculation of results from the tender questions and the commercial scores, alongside certain criteria that providers have to meet, providers are positioned against ‘tiers’ in the Framework. With 75% of the score taken from the original tender, this gives them 25% flexibility in which to change position by completing the VPM scorecard with information on their “Key Performance Indicators.”



“The VPM tool is invaluable to us in capturing information and calculating it, giving us meaningful data on which we can base decisions. It has built-in survey questions which, once answered, are uploaded automatically. We can task it with a formula to automate scores against traditional KPIs, like what percentage of the children have received health assessments in the last year or gained access to leisure activity, for example, or we can provide it with narrative for more professional input. It also gives us key indicators when looking at a provider, like what the placement stability rate is across similar providers. When we triangulate the data we can see reasons why some placements end before term. It gives us a collaborative risk management process across all participating authorities and an approach for 360-degree outcomes tracking, improving outcomes for looked after children which historically had been very difficult to measure.”



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“Providers are very conscious of their tier positions, and it acts as an incentive. Although only two years into the Framework we have already seen movement within the tiers, it has injected a bit of competition, which is a good thing for us, and they take it very seriously. The system really has transformed how we, as a sector, perform.”

Reporting

From all the information captured, 4C's can run reports as frequently as it needs, to keep an eye on performance. “If the reports show a drop in tier position for a particular provider,” explained Cheryl, “we can see a pattern and are able to discuss the reasons, which might be that they have not addressed certain issues. Business continuity is important, so they want to do better. BravoSolution gives us a powerful mechanism to reward good service but correct poor performance, it has made the system fair but most of all transparent – poor performance no longer has anywhere to hide.”

Communications tool gives peace of mind

Its role as a communications tool is one of BravoSolution's greatest strengths for 4C's. “As a communication portal it is really



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helpful," said Cheryl. "We use it extensively to communicate with many providers and it is secure. Unlike email, you never lose a message and your inbox never gets full. We work to milestones, one might be insurance details for example. When the date comes round, the system sends an automatic message to the provider that we need to see their insurance certificate – we don't even have to think about it."

"The system gives us total peace of mind in terms of security and audit trail," continued Alison. "Given the sensitive nature of our data this is paramount for us -- all documents are in one place and are easily retrievable. Even our providers tell us it is easy to use. Should we receive a challenge over a piece of communication, we have definitive proof that it was sent, who opened it, on which day and even at what time, providing a robust communication portal for both 4C's and providers. It is now our preferred method of communication."

The tables have been definitively turned

4C's employment of the software is becoming increasingly sophisticated. It can now look at how sector and individual providers compare nationally or by Local Authority. If there are issues, it can identify who the issue is with. "We are really starting to understand the market," said Alison.



"We now have a picture of what 'good' looks like. How can you know what makes a good system or provider unless you have a benchmark to compare against? We couldn't, until we had the BravoSolution system – it makes us question and compare and understand where we want to be, and we know what makes the best suppliers."



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“As a sector we get a lot of media focus on poor performance and risk, but we have providers that score really highly, so we can see and are able to show the good. Bringing the sector together has given us all an opportunity for learning and created a new business model for care support.”

Having been part of the original project team Alison and Cheryl find the future exciting. “Looking back, it’s hard to believe how we procured placements. We are an important service for children, and we are very mindful of our responsibility. Since implementing BravoSolution we have a much safer system and a fairer, more consistent and transparent approach. This is a win-win situation for us and the Welsh Government. It would have been very difficult for us to acquire funding from the Local Authorities, so having this, and the support and infrastructure made available to us, has made the long journey so much easier. It’s great that we have been given this amazing opportunity of transformation now and into the future.”



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