

Submission on the Productivity Commissions “More Effective Social Services” Issues Paper, October 2014.

Submission from the Cross Government Accreditation Working Group December 2014

Background

The Government has asked the Commission to carry out an inquiry into how to improve outcomes for New Zealanders from social services funded or otherwise supported by government. The inquiry terms of reference instruct the Commission to focus on potential improvements in the ways government agencies commission and purchase social services.

The inquiry aims to help agencies recognise how commissioning and purchasing influence the quality and effectiveness of social services, and suggest measures they could take to promote better outcomes.

The inquiry invites input from interested parties to help inform the process of the inquiry.

The Cross Government Accreditation Working Group has an interest in the inquiry, and is submitting on the issues paper accordingly.

Cross Government Accreditation Working Group (CGAWG)

The governance body for the CGAWG is the Social Sector Purchasing Steering Group (SSPSG). It is chaired by Murray Edridge, Deputy Chief Executive, Community Investment, Ministry of Social Development.

The CGAWG is made up of representatives from the Ministries of Social Development, Health, Education, Justice, Department of Corrections and Te Puni Kokiri.

The objective of the cross government accreditation (CGA) work is to:

- reduce the burden of compliance for the provider by reducing the duplication of accreditation activity for agencies
- ensure providers have the capability to deliver the required quality of services and outcomes for clients
- make it easier for a provider to transact with government (result 9).

This issue is specifically raised in the Issues Paper under *Funding concerns of non-government providers* [Box 8, pg 44], where it is noted that: “Not for profit providers are often audited multiple times a year by multiple government agencies to collect exactly the same information, which costs time, money and resources.”

Our work in this area is relevant to the inquiry as we focus heavily on service integration. Indeed, of the six ‘factors critical to service integration’ [Ham and Walsh (2013), pg 40], CGAWG project is addressing all except number five.

1. Establishing relationships where power-sharing and shared leadership are possible;
2. Building a persuasive shared vision of what integration will achieve (whilst being realistic about the costs);
3. Sharing resources and information – being open to innovation in how services are commissioned and how resources (including staff) are deployed;
4. Integration at practitioner level, not just at the management and governance levels

5. Involving and empowering clients in making choices about how and which services they access; and
6. Having a coherent strategy for all of the above, with objectives that are measured and evaluated.

For the purposes of our submission, CGAWG uses the World Health Organisations definition of “integrated” as outlined on page 39 – specifically number 6:

“Integration can mean working across sectors (e.g. education and health agencies working together to develop effective school health-promotion campaigns).”

Successes

The CGAWG has experienced a number of successes in achieving accreditation integration.

1. The initial cross government accreditation trial provider, Hohepa Homes, has reported favourably about the reduction in time and associated resource cost experienced by them as a provider when the three government agencies that accredit them coordinated their visits and process, and shared information.
2. Reports from the trial of a further 11 providers are also showing reductions in time burden on providers; an improvement in relationships; and better productivity in cross agency interaction.
3. The group has developed some generic standards for accreditation which can be used across the participating government agencies – these are due to be implemented in day to day practice from January 2015.
4. The process of working across government supports stronger relationships across government agencies – more collaborative processes, a willingness to look for joint solutions and a breaking down of barriers to reduce duplication. Stronger relationships have enabled agencies involved in this collaboration to understand and participate in each other’s processes. However, this is just a beginning and the next steps in the project will lead to wider participation from agencies, achieving long-lasting change.
5. It is anticipated that the efficiencies generated from this process can enable providers to invest more in service delivery to improve the lives of vulnerable New Zealanders.

Barriers

The CGAWG has experienced a number of barriers and challenges in working towards accreditation integration.

1. Obtaining buy-in to a cross-government process can be difficult and time consuming, particularly where cooperation requires costly procedural or institutional changes that fall outside the scope or mandate of individual parties assigned to the work.
2. No central IT system is available for CGA work. A temporary solution (Ministry of Social Development owned) is in place, but is limited by security, privacy and efficiency challenges.
3. Currently we are moving to a model of sharing information, integrating practice and integrating governance. However, this does not fully address the reduction of compliance. A focus group is developing further core standards and a framework for integrating a whole of government accreditation service delivery team.

General response to the issues paper

The CGA project was established to look at reducing accreditation compliance for providers who contract to multiple government agencies. The generic standards and operating model that have been developed are showing success in this area, which will become more evident as expansion of the process occurs in 2015.

Through the CGA operating model it has become apparent that the burden of compliance extends well beyond accreditation: specifically accreditation, monitoring and reporting require large amounts of provider resource (staff, time, and tools).

Approaching these functions from a provider perspective and not an agency / service perspective could have considerable impact on the amount of compliance required from providers.

Building understanding and relying on the skill set of others is an area that needs to continue to be developed to allow agencies to reduce compliance through monitoring service quality. Understanding the scope of this requires further investigation.

Reporting in particular is an area where providers must focus significant resource. Some providers need several full time staff to fulfil their reporting obligations. One report across all funded services that can be collated, analysed and shared would free up time for providers to focus more on service delivery and achieving better outcomes for clients.

Priority areas for CGAWG

The CGAWG is interested in several specific questions in the Inquiry and has more detailed responses in regards to these which we look forward to discussing with the Productivity Commission. In the meantime, our initial thinking around these issues is laid out below.

CGAWGs responses are in relation to CGA work.

Q25: What are the opportunities for and barriers to using information technology and data to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social service delivery?

Opportunities

One IT system across the social sector agencies for accreditation, funding, planning and contracting

- a) One New Zealand Business number for providers
- b) Sharing accreditation information
- c) A portal for accessing information

Barriers

- a) Cost of cross government IT solutions
- b) Privacy of data – needs to be carefully managed
- c) Trust – all parties need to trust the process and delivery
- d) Risk management

Q32: What additional information could tender processes use that would improve the quality of government purchasing decisions?

Access to current accreditation information that is easily accessible, and in a framework understood by all agencies. Using the CGA register to assist in the due diligence process would reduce the time providers spend duplicating this process for a tender. For example, information on financial viability.

Q38: Do government agencies engage with the appropriate people when they are commissioning a service?

The CGA Register is a single source of appropriate contact information about providers and enables agencies to identify which providers are being contracted with by other agencies. Key staff who work directly with a provider should also be engaged to share relevant information and approaches to supporting providers. There is a strategy in place to reduce current limitations.

Q 44: Do government agencies and service providers collect the data required to make informed judgements about the effectiveness of programmes? How could data collection and analysis be improved?

There are multiple challenges facing agencies in regards to collection and analysis of data. These include:

Confusion over who collects what data. Understanding the role of an accreditation process (using business viability and programme quality standards) as opposed to the role of programme advisors and contract monitoring is an issue that is not clearly understood.

Lack of understanding about who determines, and how we determine service quality. What is the role of accreditation and how do we determine best practice? More investigation is needed around this area.

Over-reliance on pro-forma reporting. Many providers face high reporting compliance burdens. Providers with cross-government contracts may submit very similar reporting to several agencies.

A focus within and across agencies on streamlining accreditation, monitoring and reporting activities will go a long way towards improving this situation.

Q45: What have been the benefits of government initiatives to streamline purchasing processes across agencies?

Benefits include:

- Better collaboration across the agencies
- Improved relationships between providers and government agencies
- Better aligned accreditation and contracting processes
- Reduction in accreditation activity for providers and agencies which releases funding for service delivery

Where could government make further improvements?

For CGA to fully eliminate duplication activity and operate a best practice based quality assurance mechanism, more investigation needs to take place into the how, what, when and where of the most effective way to run such a process. This includes exploring:

- the possibility of a centralised team to coordinate an integrated accreditation process
- a digital reporting portal that enables effective collection, analysis and quantification of data, that is available to all funders, and
- coordinated approaches across agencies to evaluating the quality of funded services.

Q53: What institutional arrangements or organisational features help or hinder the uptake and success of innovative approaches to service delivery?

Agencies currently have multiple systems for holding accreditation information. One system to support one team where each agency and provider can access and update real time information in a secure and controlled way would provide an invaluable tool for government.

Legislation and regulations act as a barrier to a truly streamlined and fully integrated accreditation process. The CGA project is working to understand what a best practice accreditation framework looks like and how to amend or develop legislation to support it.

Next steps

Some cross government standards for accreditation are being embedded from January 2015 for several of the involved agencies. The work of the CGAWG will continue to progress and support development of further standards and the operating processes related to cross government accreditation.

CGAWG looks forward to working with the Productivity Commission to provide examples of best practice in the ways government agencies commission and purchase social services.