Cooperative Councils' Innovation Network

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Wigan Council

Wigan Ethical Homecare Provider Framework – Setting the conditions for collaboration over competition

Despite having a home care budget similar to most councils, Wigan Council runs a system that achieves some of the best home care outcomes in the country, along with numerous other positive social and economic effects, including secure, well-paid local jobs and strong social connections.

This is not accidental, nor is it due to demanding higher percentages of social value in contracts. It stems from careful and deliberate system leadership aimed at a shared vision of how a thriving care system should operate.

Identifying Problems, Aims and Opportunities

The process began with Wigan Council Commissioners recognising issues within the local care market and current block commissioning methods, such as zero-hour contracts, poor care outcomes, adversarial relationships between providers and commissioners, and increasing unit costs. There were worries that many of the block contract providers were mainly driven by the chance to make a profit and showed little interest in improving outcomes for service users.

Commissioners started exploring what a better system might look like. The approach was based on the Council's commitment to genuine partnership and collaboration, valuing each other's knowledge, expertise, and insights to co-design a strong shared vision and model of home care where everyone contributes.

The council looked beyond the view of social care as just a financial burden to recognise its role in supporting a prosperous economy. Care is a vital local employment sector, and the council acknowledged the importance of a well-functioning care system in providing good jobs within the borough.

Bringing together interested parties

During a period of pre-market engagement, the council engaged extensively with anyone who might care about the issues with the current state of affairs. This was carried out in a spirit of open enquiry and aimed to understand, among other things:

- Fair and sustainable unit costs for care - exploring what would constitute a reasonable level of profit to ensure providers could remain financially stable
- The needs of service users - identifying what mattered most to the recipients of care
- Strengths and needs in local communities
- The logistical challenges of delivering care appointments across the borough

This exploratory process revealed several non-negotiable 'imperatives' for the council that would underpin the partner selection process, the contract with the local authority, and the ongoing quality assurance procedures.

Potential providers would need to prove that they were:

- willing to work on an open book basis
- Committed to paying real living wage
- Capable of delivering quality care outcomes
- Committed authentically to knowing, caring and contributing to the borough and local people beyond the contract.

Establishing Relationships

The procurement process involved establishing an Ethical Provider Framework that outlined the values and behaviours, care standards, and available resources. The council area was divided into fourteen geographically defined lots, and providers were invited to apply.

The unit cost was fixed, removing price from the assessment, which was value-based and not driven by output. Instead, the council committed to regularly reviewing costs with providers through open book accounting. This approach ensures that costs stay affordable for the council and remain sustainable for providers.

Providers were selected through testing the imperatives identified during the pre-market engagement stage. In-person interviews assessed their commitment to the place, their capabilities, and the assets and

strengths they believed they could contribute to the system. A multi-agency panel, which included the recipients of homecare, made a rigorous judgement on the most suitable suppliers. Emphasis was placed on trusting intuition and evaluating whether suppliers genuinely had the community's interests at heart or were primarily motivated by profit opportunities. Potential suppliers were encouraged to reflect on any assets and expertise they could bring to the partnership and had to agree to an open book accounting process, with a commitment from commissioners to engage annually on a sustainable and affordable fee arrangement.

Eight providers were selected for the 14 neighbourhood areas.

Delivering and tracking value in partnership

After 10 years, the partnership has surpassed expectations, achieving a broad spectrum of positive social and economic outcomes, both anticipated and unforeseen, including:

- No waiting lists for home care
- The highest proportion of CQC-rated Good and Outstanding care services in the North West
- Reduced travel times and carbon footprint for care workers
- Greatly improved recruitment and retention of staff
- Diversified workforce – 50% under 30 years old
- 86% of the workforce live in the place where they are delivering care.

Instead of specifying these outcomes and attempting to lock them into contracts, the procurement process focused on creating the right conditions and constraints for future collaboration. As well as greatly increasing social value outputs, the process has considerably improved working relationships across the system—by reducing geographical overlap, providers no longer compete for referrals and have become partners rather than rivals.

The system is now cooperating towards common goals under the stewardship of the local authority.

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