

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Leeds City Council



Leeds City Council welcomed the opportunity to work with the VCS and local children's centres to future proof current arrangements through judging various delivery models against three key criteria.

Participation in the Programme with Leeds City Council

The Programme worked with Leeds City Council to develop collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings, listening events and a workshop.¹ The workshop was held on 25 November 2011 with 25 local authority professionals, children's centre managers and staff and local VCS service provider.

The intention was to leave a clear development of collaborative working practice that will help Leeds City Council in future consultations.

The challenges for Leeds City Council professionals, children's centre managers and the VCS addressed in the Programme were:

Challenge 1 "If children's centres and the VCS delivered services through commissioning the VCS to how could this improve quality, outcomes and value for money?"

Challenge 2 "Why is the VCS not running more children's centres or their services?"

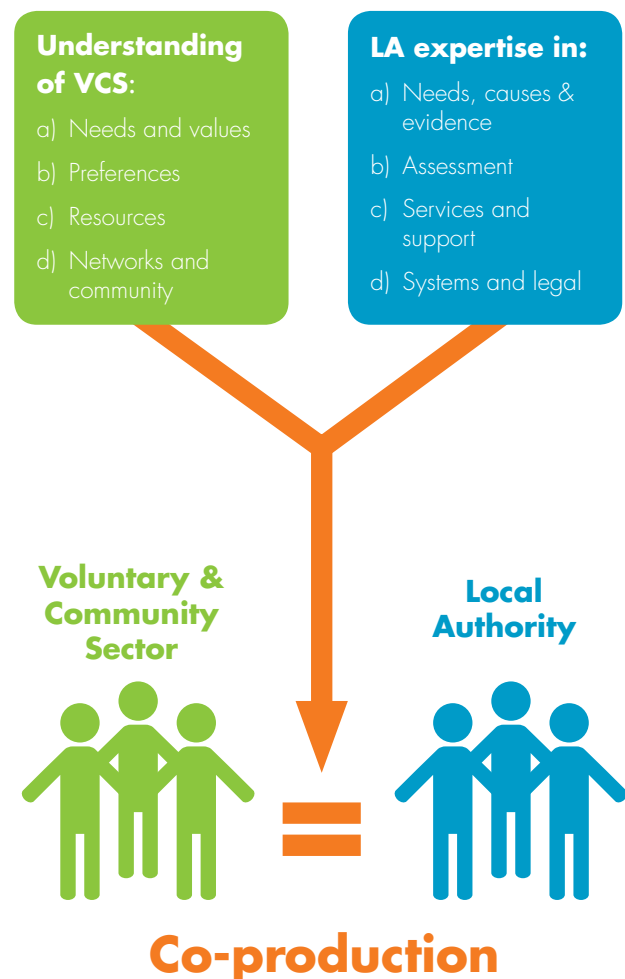
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches: De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, boardstorm or force field analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible actions using general knowledge gained by experience.

Co-production = working together to produce better outcomes

The Programme introduced the 'co-production' process, that is:

- allow time for the acceptance of a 'blank page' approach;
- agree and reiterate a clear message; and
- get decision makers and participants to 'tell it as it is'.

The content built consensus on what the challenge is, before discussing 'solutions', using a balance of 'structured' and 'open' conversation methods.



4Children launched its Children's Centres and Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) Programme in April 2011 to work with commissioners, children's centres and small to medium VCS providers in 15 local authorities over two years. The Programme aimed to explore the barriers and opportunities faced by voluntary

and community organisations in developing or managing local services for children, families and adults and those that the local authority and children's centre managers have in the involvement, engagement and commissioning of the VCS.

Learning from listening: what can both Leeds City Council and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

Common emerging themes

Six common emerging themes were developed from analysis of all the comments made in the group workshop and listening exercises. These were a 'best match' of the comments raised around meeting the challenge of collaborative working.



Partners' proposals for ways of working collaboratively

Six main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working were generated by partners through the workshop:

Performance management: Allow for the sharing of knowledge and ideas and open the possibility of meeting the needs of the community in new ways based on shared visions

Community engagement: Localities showcase what has been done with VCS partners already so opportunities to increase VCS involvement could emerge

Partnership working: Allow for different organisations working together by finding the right combination for delivering a service

Leeds City Council offer and vision: A strategic commitment to build on the capacity of the VCS who are the voice of users and close to families, along the lines of co-production with children's centres and parents that helps to build on the existing good record of VCS commissioning

Localised commissioning: Reviewing the commissioning and delivery strategy to widen VCS involvement

Change management: Facilitate local partners supported by bigger organisations to give economies of scale and create more sustainable services

Positive impact achieved

The workshop allowed for open and honest discussion between partners and showed that some interesting improvements were possible within the existing robust delivery framework. 71% of the VCS participants were positive about the idea of collaborative working, 75% of local authority participants evidenced strengthened capacity and intent in regard to collaborative working and 50% of children's centres were more willing to engage with collaborative working in the delivery of children's centre services.

Putting learning into practice for success in developing a collaborative working environment

A change in the strategic direction in children's centres and their services will not be without its difficult choices of meeting need within a tighter budget. However this Programme suggests these issues engage the VCS and children's centre workforce with the potential for a mutually supportive and creative relationship in a collaborative working model with Leeds City Council. The local authority is building on its networking opportunities and facilitating support for more informal responses in future discussion. Children's centre managers are sharing ideas with colleagues, shaping discussions for the future and engaging the VCS in advisory boards. And the VCS are working on networking opportunities, accessing the depth and range of information available and increasing their understanding of the commissioning framework.

About 4Children

4Children is the national children and families charity which develops, influences and shapes national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families and works with a wide range of partners to deliver real support for children 0-19 and families in their community.

4Children (or the National Out of School Alliance as it was originally known) was established 30 years ago in response to growing concern about the welfare of so called 'latchkey' children. Since then we have gone on to deepen and broaden our work around the needs of all children 0-19 and their families and over the last six years deliver services including more than 80 Sure Start children's centres, nurseries, out of school clubs and youth and family support.

We have worked with families, communities, local authorities and governments to develop new policy ideas and delivery solutions, to meet the evolving challenge of supporting children and their families.

Find out about 4Children's wide range of support programmes, campaigns, services, products and events at www.4Children.org.uk.

Information Helpline: 020 7512 2100

To read about the work of this programme in other areas, please visit www.4Children.org.uk