

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



Westminster City Council welcomed the opportunity to build the capacity of the local VCS to be commission ready.

Participation in the Programme with Westminster City Council

The Programme worked with Westminster City Council to develop collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings, listening events and a workshop.¹ The workshop was held jointly with Voluntary Action Westminster with 25 local VCS service providers on 24 November 2011.

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

The challenges for Westminster City Council professionals, children's centre managers and the VCS with Voluntary Action Westminster (VAW) were:

Challenge 1	"How would collaborative working look in four scenario options—full re-let of children's centre management and services, devolved commissioning to the locality hubs, council re-let of service contracts, or a hybrid model of re-let and devolved commissioning to the hubs?"
Challenge 2	"Why is the VCS not running most children's centres or their services?"

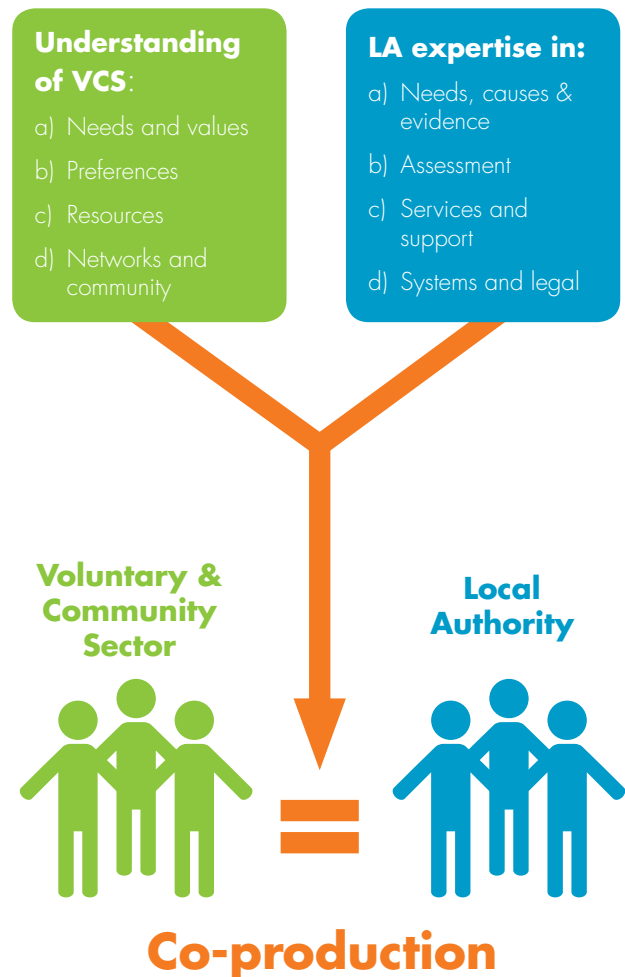
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, board storm or force field analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible 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 Westminster 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 workshops 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: VCS could identify strengths and opportunities for working together and create a space for the VCS to increase knowledge of each other's role in the locality

Community engagement: Partners could work to ensure service users views taken into account in the development of any collaborative working model

Partnership working: Address developing capacity building support with the VCS so that it can decide what opportunities to follow up, for example a consortium to build VCS capacity and added value

Westminster City Council offer and vision: Plan to share the LA's position on commissioning for 0-19s generally and children's centres in particular and clarify the role of Voluntary Action Westminster

Localised commissioning: LA commissioning strategy review to accommodate smaller VCS with commissioners adopting a listening and more respectful attitude to smaller VCS

Change management: Work to introduce change management training in co-production and collaborative working models

Positive impact achieved

The Programme found that the one model approach was of little interest and the need was to develop a local focus. This approach generated a lot of interest and engaged a wide variety of groups and because there was capacity missing among the smaller VCS there was positive traction in the notion of larger groups mentoring smaller ones to add value.

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 listening exercise suggested these are issues that will engage the VCS and children's centre workforce. Participants adopted an overall positive attitude to co-production, accepting that the 'right to challenge' has introduced common priorities which have opened minds about co-production and collaboration. Next steps include a VAW meeting to take lessons forward and the collaborative preparation of a proposal for elected members in April 2013.

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