

# Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council



**Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council** (Knowsley) welcomed the opportunity to explore the commissioning and delivery issues for children's centre services if they were community run.

## Participation in the Programme with Knowsley

The Programme worked with Knowsley to develop collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings and listening events.<sup>1</sup> A workshop was held 21 October 2011 with **40** local authority professionals, children's centre managers and staff and local VCS service providers. And a discussion paper on Mutuals was produced in November 2011.

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

**The challenges for Knowsley professionals, children's centre managers and the VCS addressed in the Programme were:**

<b>Challenge 1</b>	"For a collaborative working model (social enterprise) what are the three essential things that have worked in the past and the three essential things you need for the future?"
<b>Challenge 2</b>	"How can community and voluntary groups become better able to voice local need, enable children's centres/others to commission services to address needs and develop the capacity to deliver?"

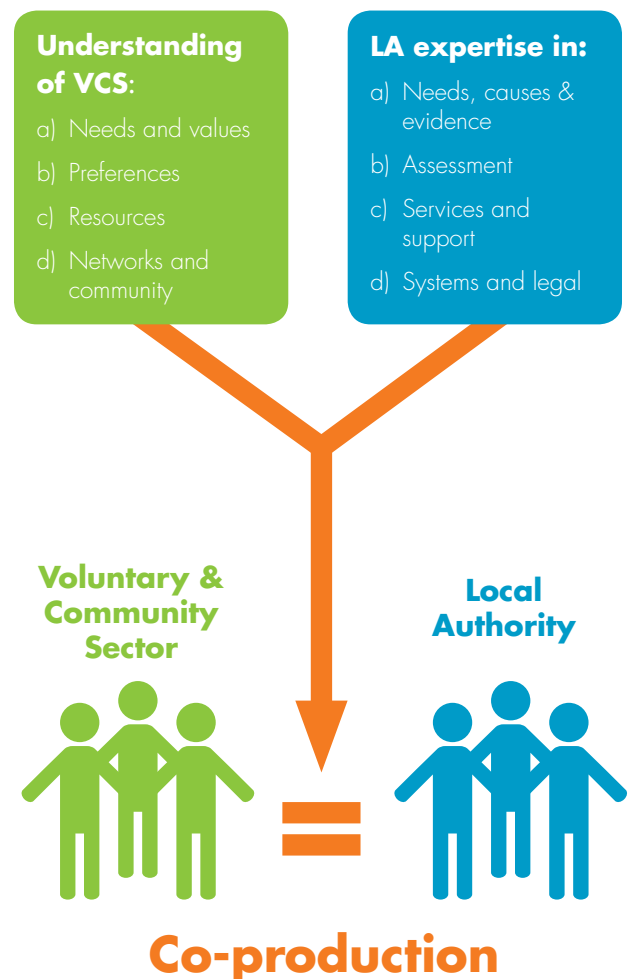
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches: De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, board storm or force field analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible 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', through 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 Knowsley Metropolitan Borough 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:** Partners could work to establish information flows 'up' and 'down' with regard to meeting need within communities identified by local groups

**Community engagement:** Partners to continue to encourage community engagement through ownership with more help and commitment from volunteers, and help to recruit, support and retain them

**Partnership working:** VCS to continue the good working relationship with children's centres by maintaining quality in supplying local needs. Plan and work harder to ensure sustainability and ethos, common values and goals

**Knowsley offer and vision:** The LA could address the provision of help with tendering, applying for funding support, development of legal governance framework and Knowsley Foundation funding management fees, policies and procedures

**Localised commissioning:** Partners could plan to share future plans for the development of children's centres in relation to commissioning out services quickly and in a user friendly and efficient way

**Change management:** Work to grow tentative community providers into robust ones – provide help with business skills development and capacity building

## Positive impact achieved

Knowsley was able through the Programme to share the learning of local community groups who are 'growing' services with children's centres and reflect on implications for services in the future. All three sectors evidenced stronger intent around commissioning the VCS to deliver children's centre services. 58% of the VCS and local authority participants were more positive about tackling key challenges and 64% of children's centres were also more positive.

## 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 supporting community grown services and their enrichment of children's centre management and practices. It is intended to use the learning to create a possible time frame for key stages of development in a Knowsley context to feed into a community friendly commissioning model.

## 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](http://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](http://www.4Children.org.uk)