

Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: Northamptonshire County Council



Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) was selected in 2012–13 for the Programme as it wanted to start collaborative conversations about the future delivery arrangements of local authority services. The programme worked with Northamptonshire County Council and Northampton Volunteer Centre to develop these collaborative conversations¹ through a workshop in October 2012. The intention was to leave a clear development of co-production practice that will help NCC in future consultations.

Participation in the Programme with NCC

The focus of the work in Northamptonshire over 2012–13 was to develop local co-production practice through a workshop. Ten VCS organisations took part in a survey about engaging with collaborative working before the workshop. More than 35 local authority professionals, VCS representatives (including Northampton Voluntary Council – NVC) and children's centre managers took part in a workshop event in October 2012.

The challenges NCC professionals, commissioners, children's centre managers and the VCS addressed in the Programme were:

Challenge 1	"To learn more about what each of us do through practical activities to improve involvement of the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the delivery of local authority services"
Challenge 2	"How can adult, children and family services work together with the voluntary and community sector to improve the opportunities of children and families?"

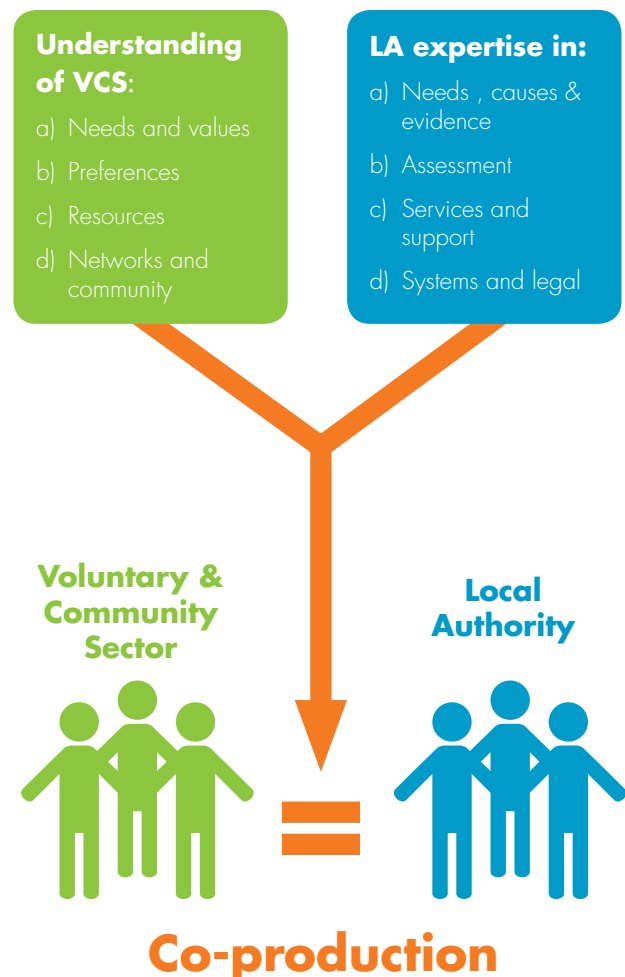
¹. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches from De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, board storm and forcefield analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible 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 Northamptonshire County 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 through by partners through the workshop:

Performance management: Support and engage VCS through networking, with a contact centre helpline to enable effective signposting to other services and resources

Community engagement: Share information with other local voluntary services through activities such as community meetings and more 'workshop' days

Partnership working: Create and run an 'online directory' which everyone can contribute to and access, although at this early stage there is no clear idea of how this would be funded

NCC offer and vision: Endorse the role of Northamptonshire County Council as a facilitator rather than a provider in the co-production environment

Localised commissioning: A recognition that co-production requires investment and a commitment to a set of actions. There is a need to ensure that this is a commitment that everyone is able to make

Change management: Keep adults, children and families at the centre by involving them from the start, making people aware of what services and support are available and adopting a 'listening' approach

Positive impact achieved

The workshop evidenced a willingness of the local VCS to work collaboratively with NCC and NVC, with NCC taking a facilitator role rather than a provider role in the new way of working.

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. Next steps will work towards a task group VCS meeting with NVC to look at information sharing between statutory and voluntary services and a drilling down to ascertain what skills support the VCS sector might want for successful co production service delivery.

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