

# Engaging the Voluntary and Community Sector in Children's Centre Commissioning: London Borough of Barnet



**London Borough of Barnet** (Barnet) wanted to be part of a national programme to shape the local discussion with schools and the VCS. They also wanted to explore how social enterprises can help strengthen/develop the local market.

## Participation in the Programme with Barnet

The Programme worked with Barnet to develop these collaborative conversations through a series of **task group** meetings, listening events and workshops.<sup>1</sup> A workshop was held with upwards of 50 local authority professionals, schools, children's centre managers, staff, and local VCS service providers in November 2011.

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

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

<b>Challenge 1</b>	"How are we going to improve VCS involvement with children's centres?"
<b>Challenge 2</b>	"How are we going to get joined up thinking in moving to a co-production model of children's centres service delivery?"

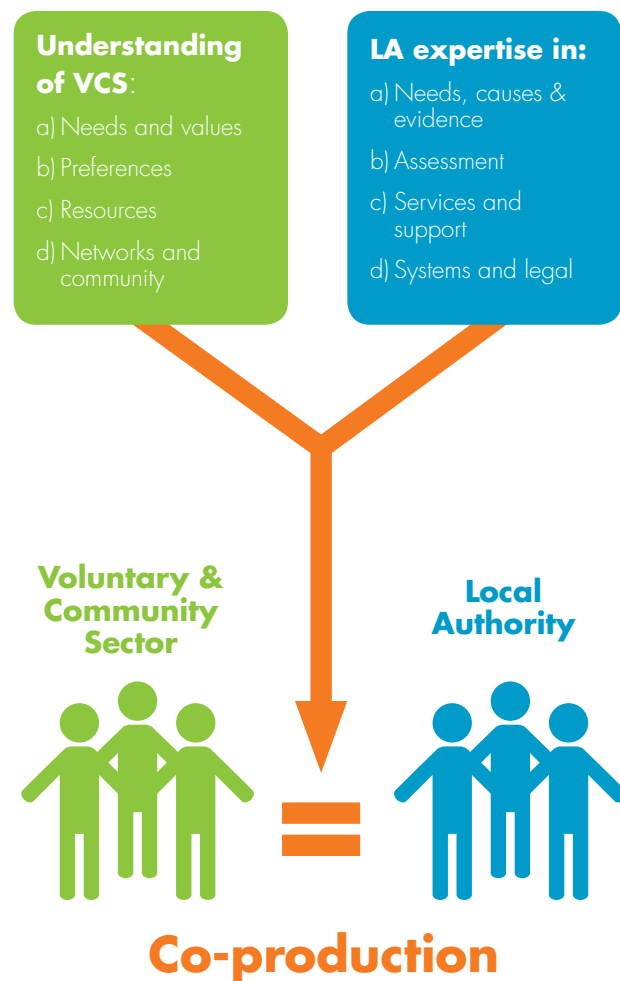
1. Over the two years, individual workshops used a range of approaches: De Bono, Open Space, KJ methodologies, focused conversations, speed dating exercises, board storm, or force field analysis. Solutions were generated using heuristic reasoning which is a simplification or educated guess of possible 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', 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 the London Borough of Barnet and the local VCS do differently using a co-production model?

## Common emerging themes

Five 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

Five main proposals to achieve successful collaborative working, one for each theme, were generated by partners through the workshop:

**Performance management:** Involve VCS partners in the planning and delivery of services where children's centres are school-based, with shared language, understandings and expectations

**Community engagement:** Build on local VCS knowledge and identify models already working in Barnet with hard data and a benefit analysis

**Barnet offer and vision:** Create a shared vision to support children and families in Barnet to show where and how the VCS could add value with Barnet adopting an enabling role

**Localised commissioning:** Ensure that VCS are able to scrutinise and challenge decisions and recognise the VCS as equal partners

**Change management:** Develop a framework that is recognisable, comprehensible and consistent over the range of services with an agreed understanding among partners of what quality looks like

## Positive impact achieved

The workshop stimulated challenging conversations and rather led to a willingness to work towards a co-production strategy among the VCS and the children's centres. 25% of both VCS and children's centre managers were more positive about tackling key challenges in the journey to achieving collaborative 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 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 the London Borough of Barnet.

The way forward was around partnership working rather than outsourcing the running of school-based children's centres. More engagement and involvement with the VCS in any change to the governance of children's centres was seen as an important way forward. This was to take the form of joint presentations to key decision makers and then joint working to agree future commissioning frameworks.

## 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)